

THE INTENDED LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

The closing word of this letter is highly practical, crowded with many helpful things. This unknown writer (whom I strongly suspect to be the Apostle Paul) felt very much like the sentiment of a limerick I often quote,

There was a young poet in Japan
Whose poetry no one could scan.
When told it was so,
He replied, "Yes, I know,
But I try to get as many words in the last line as I can."

In this last chapter the writer has tried to squeeze in every bit he can in the way of practical application.

In this chapter, as throughout this whole letter, it is evident that God is not interested in religion. This may come as a surprise to many, but God is not primarily interested in religion, but in life. He recognizes that life is lived in segments, like an orange, or in layers, like an onion. An individual has a social life, a business life, a sex life, a school life, etc. The Christian finds that, for him, life falls into two main categories: his contacts with the world, and his contacts with the body of Christ, the Church. His life, therefore, is divided between the world and the church. I do not mean by that a division in time, as Monday through Saturday for the world, and Sunday, alone, for the Lord. I am talking about the relationship Christians must have with two kinds of people -- the worldling and the believer. This letter closes with very helpful words about both. There is a section on life in the world, then one in life in the body, and then two magnificent verses on life lived at the center.

Now let us take the first section on life in the world.

**Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." Hence we can confidently say,
"The Lord is my helper,
I will not be afraid;
what can man do to me?" {Heb 13:1-6 RSV}**

Here is a very striking commentary on Romans 12:2. "Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind," {Rom 12:2a RSV}. That is the Christian's calling -- not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed in the midst of it. The Christian must live his life in touch with the world. There is a very dangerous and terrible philosophy which has been widespread among Christians (fortunately it is beginning to fade), that Christians were intended to isolate themselves from the world, to draw lines of demarcation, huddle behind high, towering walls that would exclude them from the activities, the thoughts, and the attitudes of the world. It is common today to meet Christians who have raised their children in a Christian atmosphere from the womb to the tomb, sending them to Christian schools, insisting they get a job in a Christian company, and thus living a secluded life for all their earthly career.

Now this is wrong. The New Testament clearly declares it is wrong. It is anti-Christian, and anti-Scriptural, for it is against the command of God. The Lord Jesus has told us to be in the world, and has sent us forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Though we may be in a hostile environment, Christians are still expected to live in touch with the world. But they themselves are to be different. That is the point, that is the separation the Bible speaks of, "come out from among them and be ye separate," {2 Cor 6:17 KJV}. It does not mean

physical isolation, but it means Christian attitudes in the midst of the world are to be different.

Now, in this passage you have this difference outlined in a rather outstanding way:

First of all, Christians are to have an open house to strangers. This is something the world knows little of. The worldling is content only to entertain his friends, perhaps a very limited circle. Christians are to entertain other Christians (that is part of what it means, "let brotherly love continue"), but do not stop at this. "Do not neglect also to show hospitality to strangers." A Christian home is to be a center of hospitality to which strangers and worldlings are to have access.

Obviously this calls for initiative on the part of Christians. Strangers do not come around knocking at your door asking for an invitation to a meal. We must assume the initiative. The film ministry we are to have in homes this summer provides a marvelous opportunity for this kind of initiative to be shown. It is a way to bring into your home those who have not yet heard the tremendous, revolutionary themes of Christian faith, and give them opportunity to hear them and understand them.

And this type of ministry has a special beneficiary effect upon the host as well, for the writer reminds us that "thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Perhaps he is referring to the experience of Abraham when three guests came to his home and he found that they were the Lord and two accompanying angels. At any rate he is indicating that there can be surprising blessing come from the entertainment of strangers in your home. Frequently you will find yourself more than amply rewarded by the initiative you have shown in this direction.

This is so practical I would like to pinpoint it with a question: How many of you have had a non-Christian into your home this past year? How many have taken this admonition practically and seriously and done this? For these things were intended to be practical means by which we can put into practice the tremendous themes we have been learning in the book of Hebrews. Well, that is the first thing, an open house to strangers.

The second relationship with the world must be an open heart to the oppressed. "Remember those who are in prison as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body." This means the Christian must not shut his eyes and ears to the needy around him. We must not be like the Levite and the Pharisee in the parable of the Good Samaritan who, out of a sense of religious concern, shut their eyes to the need of the stranger and walked by on the other side, and thus earned the scathing rebuke implied by the Lord Jesus. Christians are to have eyes and ears and hearts open to those who are in need around them, whether in or otherwise oppressed or mistreated, and to do something about it. Here is a call to the ministry of compassion.

I will never forget the shock that came to me while visiting in a home one day, to have a Christian woman tell me of an incident that had occurred the night before. Her neighbor had come to her in great distress of heart and asked for help in some temporary crisis that had struck her home. As this Christian woman told me about it, she said, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I moved here to get away from this kind of people, and if this woman keeps coming over to my house, I'll just have to find another home." My heart sank within me at that attitude. How totally unchristian!

Certainly this touches the delicate question today of civil rights. What about the Negro people, and the oppression under which many of them are undoubtedly living, not only in the South but in the North as well? This verse should make very clear that it is wrong for Christians to ignore this kind of a question. We cannot defend all that is being done in this direction today, and perhaps some of the efforts to help are quite mistaken, but as individuals we must be responsive to the need.

Here is a point I would like to make crystal clear. I do not believe the New Testament gives the Church warrant to issue proclamations on political problems the nation may be facing, or social issues. As a body, the Church has no message to the world except the message of the gospel, to declare the good news in Jesus Christ. But as individuals the writer correctly points out that we cannot be rightly related to the God who loves all men everywhere and not show this in some definite, practical, helpful way. There must be deep concern about those who are oppressed, troubled, and underprivileged, and a readiness to involve ourselves in some kind of help.

Perhaps we need to open our eyes a good deal wider to these opportunities in our own community, and to see that there are those around us that need much help.

A number of years ago I read an article by Averill Harriman. He was about to depart for France as the Ambassador from the United States when someone said to him, "How is your French?" He said, "Oh, my French is excellent; all except the verbs!"

Perhaps that is true of many Christians. We have such wonderful nouns: Lord, Friend, Brother. And such inspiring adjectives: Noble, Sacred, and Divine. But sometimes our verbs are very weak -- we have little action. But we are called to a readiness to apply in specific terms the love of God by deeds of kindness and help to those who are oppressed around us. The Christian must have an open heart to the oppressed.

Then, third, he must have open eyes to the dangers of life:

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; {Heb 13:4-5a RSV}

Nonconformity to the world must certainly involve these areas. The loose sexual standards of our generation and the intense materialistic spirit of this age constitute a constant peril to our hearts, and we must beware of them. We must realize that God has undertaken to sustain the sacredness of marriage and that he unceasingly, unrelentingly judges violations of it. Therefore, we dare not heed the fine sounding declarations being made today about a "new morality," as though we had passed beyond the ancient standards and they no longer had significance.

As this writer reminds us, God judges the immoral and adulterous. He does not mean that God looses lightning bolts from heaven against them, or that he causes terrible diseases to come upon them; these are not the forms of judgment. But we can see the judgment of God in the terrible tempest of mental pressures and crackups which sweep like a plague across this land. They are due to the breakdown of moral standards. The certain deterioration of life is the judgment of God when sex standards are violated. It is the brutalization of humanity, so men become like animals and live on the level of animals. This is so apparent in our day.

Then there is the danger of materialism: "keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have." This means we must swim against the strong currents of a luxury loving age. We must not give in to the pressures to "keep up with the Joneses," the mad rush to have all that the worldlings around us have. The weakness of the Church is due in large part to the failure of Christians to be content with what God gives them.

This does not mean that all Christians should take a vow of poverty. There is nothing like that in the New Testament, for it is evident that God allows certain standards of living, certain levels of prosperity differing one from another. The point the writer makes is not that there is anything wrong in riches, but that we must learn to be content with what God has given. Contentment is not having what you want; it is wanting only what you have.

It is difficult to know where to draw the line between a proper increase in the standard of living, and needless luxury which is really waste, but the secret is given in the latter part of the verse: "For he has said, 'I will never fail you nor forsake you.'" That is the promise of God. He is our great and unending resource and will never fail us. Here is the strongest negative in the New Testament. The original carries the thought, "I will never, never, under any circumstances, ever leave you or forsake you." It is a mighty declaration and on the basis of it the writer says we should declare, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid (of loss or poverty or anything else). What can man do to me?" If I have God, what can man do to me? The point is that we must be content to take only what God gives us.

There is that wonderful story in Genesis concerning Abraham as he returned from battle with the five kings, having recovered the wealth of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which had been taken by the invading

armies. Abraham brought this wealth back to the king of Sodom, who offered him a great reward. But Abraham said, "I have determined in my heart that the king of Sodom shall not be able to say, 'I have made Abraham rich,'" {cf, Gen 14:23}. Abraham was saying in effect, "I will only take what God is content to give me. I don't want riches from any other source." If the Christian assumes that attitude, he reasons, "If God grants me increase, fine; I'll take it. But I am not going to struggle after it. This is not my goal. I will not make the increase of money my purpose for living, for I am content with what I have." This kind of contentment permits us to be natural, uncritical. We do not go around judging those who have more than we have. We are quite content to let God deal with them, for we are content to have God deal with us.

Now, that is the Christian in relationship to the world. Let us now look at life in the Body. Here is life as a Christian must live it out in terms of his relationship to the body of Christ, the Church. Every Christian soon discovers that he is part of a new community -- the community of the redeemed. It is a kind of secret society, the members of which are everywhere. Whenever you meet one, you discover you share a relationship with him that is often closer than flesh and blood. You discover in experience the truth we sing of in the hymn:

Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God
Brothers, we are treading
Where the saints have trod;
We are not divided,
All one body we,
One in hope and doctrine
One in charity.

That is true, even though there are some who have suggested that, by all appearances, it should be revised to be sung something like this:

Like a mighty turtle
Moves the Church of God;
Brothers, we are treading
Where we've always trod;
We are much divided,
Many bodies we,
Strong in hope and doctrine,
Weak in charity.

It is true there are many divisions outwardly in the body of Christ today, but there is also discoverable an inward relationship which links all true believers, who are born again and indwelt of the Holy Spirit, with one another. This is the life the writer now describes, life in that kind of a body.

The first thing we discover is that there is a structure of leadership within this body.

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. {Heb 13:7-8 RSV}

And then in Verse 17,

Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly for that would be of no advantage to you. {Heb 13:17 RSV}

The first injunction seems to look back to the heritage of the past, to those men and women who have died and left their testimony behind. Perhaps it refers to those who led them to Christ, whom they knew personally and who spoke to them the Word of God. He says of them, "Notice the way they ended their lives and imitate their faith," and links with this the great declaration, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." What he was to the men and women of the past, he can be, and is, to us today, absolutely changeless. It is this changeless Christ which is the great refuge of the Christian in a changing world. Therefore as we look back to

the men and women of the past, the Luthers, the Wesleys, the Moodys, or perhaps some godly Sunday school teacher or parent who has led us to Christ and established us in Christ, we are to imitate their faith which was fixed upon a changeless Christ.

This verse, by the way, is often misused today. There are those who say because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, he must inevitably do the same in every age that he has done in the past. There are those who use this to defend tongues, faith-healing, etc. Because Christ healed all those who came to him, they insist all who come today must inevitably be healed. But remember this verse does not say Jesus Christ does the same, he is the same. His doing may change according to the times, but his character never changes, it is always the same.

Life in the body of Christ also involves a simplicity of belief.

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings; for it is well that the heart be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited their adherents. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. {Heb 13:9-12 RSV}

Here he warns against diverse and strange teachings which are linked, evidently, with food restrictions and external religious demands. These are the food faddists of the first century. It refers to those who insisted on Judaistic restrictions of diet as having spiritual value. This is seen in our own day in such practices as giving up meat for Lent, burning candles for certain observances, counting beads, or any form or ceremony upon which some religious value is placed.

Now let us be very frank and open about this. All through this letter the writer has told us again and again that such observances are simply empty shadows; they are pointing toward something, but the something they point toward is the real value, not the shadows. As he says here, "We have an altar from which those who serve the tent [i.e., who indulge in shadow-acting] have no right to eat." You cannot have both the shadow and the substance; it is either one or the other. You cannot feed on the reality if you place value on the mere picture. You cannot have both.

There is a very sly thrust here in these words, "which have not benefited their adherents." He says, look at these people who have been so concerned about form, these lean, hungry, long-faced, haunted souls who want you to get involved in restrictions of diet, etc. Look at them! They have not even been helped by their own programs, they are no better off for all their restrictions. Food does not strengthen the heart, he says, but grace does. Grace truly strengthens and if you try to feed your heart on empty religious ordinances then you cannot feed yourself upon the strength of God's grace! That is the whole thing. If you put value in the external, then the real can have no meaning to you.

This is illustrated in the tabernacle, for back in the days when the sin offerings were brought into the tabernacle the priests were forbidden to eat of them but the bodies of the sin offerings were taken outside the camp and burned there. The priest could eat of the meat of the burnt offerings, and the other offerings, but not the sin offering. Those bodies were cast outside the gate and there burned. Thus it was with the Lord Jesus when he came. They took him outside the city of Jerusalem and put him to death on a cross outside the gate. Thus the religion of the world, with its emphasis upon the external, is ignored by God. Man fulfills his proper function only by receiving what God has done in Christ, without any need for observances or candles or form or ceremony, but by a quiet act of faith. That is the simplicity of belief in Jesus Christ. It is so uncomplicated, so simple, so available to all.

There is also in the life in the body a sacrifice of service.

Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse for him. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that

acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. {Heb 13:13-16 RSV}

And verse 18,

Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. {Heb 13:18-19 RSV}

There, again, is the practical side to this sacrifice of service which involves meekness. Let us go outside the camp, like Christ, and, like hi, put up with misunderstanding and abuse and persecution from those who cannot see what we see in him. Let us remember that meekness is the ability to take praise without conceit, and blame without resentment. This is the curriculum of grace, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart," {cf, Matt 11:29}. Therefore let us go forth unto him outside the camp, for here we have no lasting city, that is, nothing permanent.

Then there is a sacrifice of praise, "let us continually offer praise to God." As Paul says to the Thessalonians, "In everything give thanks," {1 Th 5:18}. I have learned to gauge the spiritual life of a Christian by noting the absence or presence of a complaining spirit. When Christians complain they have obviously failed to grasp the great truth that everything has been sent for a purpose. Therefore, "in everything give thanks." If all we can do is gripe, grumble, groan, moan and complain it shows that we have failed to believe what God says is true.

The third aspect of this is sharing all things in common. "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have." The word is "communicate," or "to hold all things in common." That is not Communism. Communism says, "What's yours is mine." But Christianity says, "What's mine is God's; therefore it's yours." There is the difference -- a readiness to hold all things in common for the Lord's sake. Finally, there is a note on prayer. "Pray for us," the apostle can say, "pray for us." Every Christian needs enlightenment and empowerment. Life is too big for us to handle alone, too complicated, too highly structured. There are too many deceitful things about it. We are so confused, so easily bewildered. But prayer can cut through these illusions and bring us understanding and perspective. That is why the apostle continually asked, "Pray for us," and the writer here says, "I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you."

The final section is on life lived at the center.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. {Heb 13:20-21 RSV}

Man now possesses great nuclear submarines by which the oceans can be traversed without ever coming to the surface. The secret of their tremendous power lies in a nuclear reactor hidden away in the depths of the submarine. That strange, remarkable force does not need any refueling but is constantly giving off energy, so the submarine never needs to go into port for refueling. So it is in the life of a Christian. In these two verses is revealed the nuclear reactor intended for every Christian.

Look at the elements of this. "Now may the God of peace." In this letter we have seen what peace is. The nearest modern equivalent is "mental health." That is what you are after, is it not? In Christ we are in touch with the God of mental health, the God who intends life to be lived on a peaceful level. With him is linked the Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

I like that phrase, "the Great Shepherd of the sheep." I came from Monta-aaa-na and know a good deal about sheep. If you are from the city you have probably learned about sheep from "Mary had a Little Lamb" and "Little Bo Peep." You think, therefore, that their fleece is as white as snow, and that if you leave them alone they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them. But I can assure you it is all a lie; it is not true!

Sheep are the most helpless of creatures. There are two outstanding characteristics of sheep: they have no wisdom, and they have no weapons. They are forever running off and getting lost and unable to find their way

back, and if anything attacks them they are utterly helpless to defend themselves. That is why they need a shepherd.

And that is why we need a shepherd, and why the Bible likens us to sheep. We have a Great Shepherd of the sheep. He is our resource, our provision -- a God who is concerned about mental health, and a Great Shepherd who is there to watch us because we have no wisdom and we have no weapons for our defense.

Linked with them is this great process that is spoken of here, "who brought again from the dead ... by the blood of the eternal covenant." There you have the cross and the resurrection, and what these mean has been spelled out for us in this letter. The cross means the end of the old life of self-reliance, and the resurrection sets forth the power of the new life, that marvelous inner force which is greater than any other force that the earth has known anything about. The mightiest demonstration of power the world has ever seen was not the hydrogen bomb, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ! The hydrogen bomb can do nothing but destroy. The only power that earth knows anything about that can take life and put it together again is the resurrection power of a risen Christ. That is the power that is released within the Christian by the indwelling Christ within him. We talk about the conquest of outer space but the greatest conquest ever made was when the Lord Jesus conquered inner space by moving into the heart of man, to plant within us the greatest power by which life can be lived -- a power that heals and makes whole.

The result of all this is that God will equip you with everything good that you may do his will. This is the secret of effective service. You do not have to ask God to do this, he is there to do it, to equip you with everything good that you may do his will. There is no excuse for failure, is there? There is a full supply here and full ability, working in you. God is going to work through you, not apart from your will, but right along with it. You choose, you start out, but he is there to carry it through.

Then there is full acceptance, even before it happens. "Working in you that which is pleasing in his sight." You know you are going to please God, you know that you cannot help but please him when you walk in this way and live on this basis.

As Major Ian Thomas so accurately put it, "You are fighting a battle already won." But if we try to live in the self-effort of the flesh, we are fighting a battle already lost.

Now notice this whole thing is wrapped around with the most dynamic, most revolutionary, most life-changing phrase ever uttered by man, "through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." "Through Jesus Christ." That is the secret of life, that is the way God intended man to live -- through Jesus Christ. Paul can say in Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," {cf, Phil 4:13}. What an adequate program! What a mighty gospel! What good news for this present life!

God intended it for you, that you might live in your present circumstances, wherever you are.

The letter closes now with some personal greetings that are self-explanatory. We will not take time to comment on them since they explain themselves. Let us join together in prayer.

Prayer

Our dear Father, thank you for this mighty letter coming to us across twenty centuries of time, reflecting the great truths that are still available, still demonstrable in our very midst. Help us to grasp and understand these, but more than that, give us the courage to step out upon them, to live life on this basis, that we might enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God, for we pray in thy name, Amen.

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