

LIVING IN FOCUS

by Ray C. Stedman

A number of years ago at Stanford University, Arnold Toynbee, the prominent historian, said that most people today have rejected Christianity on the basis of a caricature.

What did he mean?

He meant that most people have never seen the real thing. They have never seen real Christianity. What they have seen was a blurred, distorted and twisted picture of Christianity, and they turned away disappointed and indifferent to the claims of Christ. Well, what were they looking for?

Perhaps more than we professing Christians may realize, men and women in the world today expect to see in Christians some likeness to Christ. If you listen carefully to the protest movements that are so vocal today, and which have captured the ear of the press and the nation, you will see that the heart of their complaint is that they do not see in Christians, and the church, that likeness to Christ which they have been led to expect. That is why they turn away so disappointed, often bitter in their antagonism.

Now the fault, of course, is with the church. I know how easy it is for us to read the papers today and, seeing the spreading tide of restlessness, riot, and lawlessness in our day, point the finger in self-righteousness at this, go "tut-tut," and decry it as a terrible thing. Yet, I am increasingly convinced that the finger of blame, if it must be pointed anywhere, should be pointed at the church. It is the church that is at fault -- not the rebels, not the world in its evil ways. For the image of Christ in Christians has been terribly blurred. That is the essential problem.

It is like a picture that is out of focus, where everything is fuzzy, undefined, blurred.

Fortunately, this is not always the case. One of the encouraging aspects of our time is the increasing degree to which Christians are recapturing the image of Christ. He is coming into focus again for the world to see. Men and women everywhere are taking down their religious facades, their posturing pretensions, their self-righteous images of themselves, and are becoming real people again, and, through them, the love of Christ is beginning to show. Jesus said, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me," {John 12:32 KJV}. A Christ that has touched the life of a man, and crucified him, will always draw men unto him.

That is what these studies in Ephesians 4 have been telling us. Here, in this chapter, among many other places in the Word of God, we see set forth the secret of living in focus. How is it done? How can a person live in a confused, bewildered, pathetically blinded world, where false ideas and false philosophies are trumpeted abroad on every side, and still be in touch and live in focus? The apostle tells us in Ephesians 4 that it is by a repetitive walk of two steps. By continuously fulfilling the process of putting off the old life and putting on the new. That is possible to a Christian because he has received a new life. "He that has the Son has life, but he that has not the Son of God does not have life," {cf, 1 Jn 5:12}. There is no use trying to live on this level if you have not begun with Jesus Christ, have not received him. But if you have invited him into your life and heart, and he dwells there, as he promised he would, then you can live in a new life and it is that kind of living that captures people's attention. Put off the old, put on the new. Put off the deceitful urges of the old life that still come with all their alluring power. Put them off by a deliberate choice of the will. Agree with God about the old life and then put on the self-giving qualities of the new life in Jesus Christ, by a deliberate act and choice of the will. They are available to you in him.

The key to this is to face the fact that you never can be half-and-half at the same time. That is the whole thing. You can never put off part of the old man at any given moment. You must reject it in totality, then you can put on the new. Paul says this also in that wonderful 13th chapter of Romans where he is dealing with the practical level of Christian living. He says there, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to

fulfill the lusts thereof," {cf, Rom 13:14}. If you honestly put off the old, then you can truly put on the new, but you cannot do the second until you have done the first. As we find ourselves clinging to part of the old life, hanging on to areas of it that we particularly enjoy, wanting to defend these and excuse them, and therefore we cannot put on the new. If we honestly put off the old, we can put on the new; but we cannot put off only the outward actions of the old while the heart remains the same. If we do, we shall discover we are unable to put on the love, the compassion, or the joy of Jesus Christ, but we will try to imitate it, and when we do we become a phony and our phoniness is evident to everyone but ourselves.

Now Paul gives four very practical examples of the areas of life where this process must apply. As we saw previously, he talks about lying, temper, stealing, and evil conversation. We have already looked closely at the first two of these. We saw that, as Christians, we must take these very seriously. This is not simply good advice; it is basic to living as Christian -- put off these things! We must never permit ourselves the luxury of continuing in any of them. These are elementary. The fundamental change which Christianity will make in you should be evident at least in these areas: Lying, temper, stealing, and evil talk. He is dealing with elementary things, not advanced Christian living. We must start there.

These include all the subtle variations of these things. As we have already seen in the matter of lying, it includes even the so called "white lies," and in the matter of temper such things as pouting, resentments, and harboring grudges. All these must go, and go early, in our Christian experience.

We need to be reminded from time to time that there is something wrong with a Christian who can say "Well I know I have a bad temper, I've had one for years, but you will just have to make allowances for it." That reveals that such a person does not want to deal with his problem. There is something wrong in his thinking, he is kidding himself. He really wants to hang on to his temper, he does not want to get rid of it. That is the problem, and that is why it keeps on year after year. No, the apostle says, we must come to grips with these, we must put off these things, and put on the new. It takes a while to change our thinking, but we must begin and start changing our thinking and our attitudes. We cannot allow them to continue on and on.

Now we come to the last two of these practical areas.

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. {Eph 4:28-29 RSV}

"Let the thief no longer steal." As the King James Version puts it, "Let him that stole, steal no more."

(Perhaps you recall the clever way someone got around the admonition of this verse by discovering that in the early manuscripts of the Bible, the Greek letters were not divided up into sentences and paragraphs as we know them but were all run together unbroken on the page. Scholars have had to break them up into the sentences and the paragraphs that are familiar to us. When this person discovered this, he felt that since the punctuation was not inspired, he could punctuate it to suit himself. Rather than reading it, "Let him that stole steal no more." He read it, "Let him that stole steal, no more let him labor with his hands." Perhaps that indicates the extent to which the fallen heart will go to justify itself.)

But here is a categorical demand that the Christian stop stealing, and that means stealing of all kinds. This is not a word addressed only to the professional thief, but includes all amateurs as well, and covers all amateur forms of stealing, no matter how sophisticated they may be. It includes shoplifting, tax dodging, shady bookkeeping, borrowing without returning, obtaining money on false pretenses, false advertising, shifty promotion schemes, and whatever else may be the means of depriving another of his property without giving him true value in return. "Let him that stole steal no more." Stop it! Why? Because, as this whole passage is telling us, this is an expression of that old, egocentric, fallen, Adamic life which seems to offer much immediately. That is the motive that drives a person to steal. He wants something now, and stealing looks like the short cut to get it, but it is a deceitful urge. It lies to you. You will get what you are after, the immediate goal, but with it you will also get what this old life always gives you: It will produce tension, discord, heartache, frustration, defeat and death. There is no way to avoid it. But the whole thing has been judged in the

cross of Jesus Christ. When the Lord Jesus hung on that tree, the Scripture tells us, he was "made sin for us," {cf, 2 Cor 5:21 KJV}. He became a thief, he became a murderer, he became a liar, a drunkard. Oh, he did not do these things himself, but he assumed them -- he became, he was made, sin. He who did none of these things himself took our place -- that is the whole meaning of the cross. And when he was made what we are, God put him to death, because that is what this old life deserves. There is nothing good in it, nothing good can come from it, because it is flesh, egocentric, self-centered. That is what stealing always manifests -- an utter unconcern for someone else and a totally self-centered desire to satisfy your own needs and wants. That is stealing, therefore it is not to be part of a Christian life because that has been judged and must go.

Do not be fooled by all the modern talk today about relativity of morals. There are many who would tell us that stealing is right if it is for a good cause. Unfortunately, there have been thousands of Christians who have fallen into that trap and felt that if the cause was good enough, true enough, holy enough that any kind of means were justified in fulfilling it. It is a kind of Robin Hood philosophy, of stealing from the rich in order to give to the poor. Perhaps even worse is the concept that it is not wrong to steal, it is only wrong to get caught. There is plenty of that abroad today. But all this points up the difference between what we might call the conscience of convenience versus the conscience of conviction. The conscience of convenience is that conscience which is controlled or limited only by what it thinks it can get away with. That, by and large, is the conscience the world lives by. You are working in an office and you have access to the stamp drawer. As you are working away you discover it is possible to write personal letters and use some of the office stamps. You say that everybody in the office does it, so you justify it on that basis. Now supposing one of your fellow workers comes along to you and says "Look, I have devised a scheme by which we can safely embezzle \$10,000 from this office. I'd like you to join me in this." You say "What do you mean? What do you think I am, a thief? I only steal stamps!" But there is no perceptible difference in principle between stealing stamps and \$10,000. That is the conscience of convenience.

You can produce that same kind of conscience in an animal. You can train your dog to run out in the morning, and bring in your newspaper from the front lawn. You teach him how to put it in his mouth, and you work on him for awhile, giving him a piece of candy every time he does it. After awhile the dog catches on, and he knows that bringing in the newspaper from the front step is "candy right," he gets candy every time. But then he gets overenthusiastic and begins to bring in the neighbors' newspapers. When you discover this you smack him alongside the head. This puzzles him for awhile, but, if it goes on, he will catch on that it is "candy right" to bring in your newspaper, but it is "smack wrong" to bring in the neighbors', and there is a distinction here. He learns there is such a thing as "candy right" and "smack wrong." Now that is a conscience of convenience. It merely reacts to the realities of a situation. If you change the circumstances you can change the dog's habits, and eventually make him do the exact opposite. He has a conscience about it, but it is a conscience of convenience. That is the level upon which most people seem to live today.

But a conscience of conviction is the awareness that is produced in the Christian heart that it is basically wrong to deprive another of his property by any manner other than what the lawyers call, "due process of law." Why? Because it injures the other person. It arises from the old life that does not care for anyone else but you. But let me point out something. The world is not impressed by Christians who simply stop stealing, for, at that point, it is very difficult to distinguish between a conscience of conviction and a conscience of convenience. Even worldlings will stop stealing if the liability of getting into trouble is clear enough, and yet they may be operating only from a conscience of convenience as do many Christians, too. So merely to stop stealing is not particularly arresting. Many Christians stop right here in their Christian experience and expect the world to be amazed, to be impressed by this fact. We are honest. We do not steal. We do not deprive another of his property. There are many Christians who have reached only this stage. They are honest, they do not steal, but no one is impressed. Why? Well, because that is only half the process of living as a Christian. That is putting off the old, but go on, put on Christ.

What does the rest of the verse say? "... rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he will be able to give to those in need." Now that is putting on Christ. That is what is impressive. It is not the negative virtue of being honest, but the positive one of being generous, of pouring out to those who are in need, of helping those around from a positive concern and compassion, that is when life begins to come into focus. When the image of Christ is no longer blurred, the heart gives joyously, generously, hilariously. That is why Paul writes to the Corinthians, "God loves a cheerful giver," {cf, 2 Cor 9:7}. There is no joy like the joy

of giving, for it manifests a heart that is concerned with others' needs. And that is positive Christianity. Put off the old, yes, but put on the new, put on Christ.

Now the fourth area he speaks of is that of evil conversation.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. {Eph 4:29 RSV}

Literally, in Greek, it is, "let no rotten words come out of your mouths." That covers the whole range of evil talk, from obscenity and filth to idle rumors and gossiping. Rotten words, words that are corrupt, that smell, that have become decayed. Today we are facing a rising tide of pornography and lewdness in both literature and speech. The tendency of the world today is to fling off all bands, all restrictions, as though these were creating slavery. Some are so blinded, so deceived, as to think the freedom to say ugly, filthy, rotten things is a sign, a manifestation of true freedom. But in the light of the Scriptures (the truth as it is in Jesus), you see how foolish, how wrong this is. It is not a manifestation of freedom at all. It is a manifestation of utter slavery, of being bound, of being held in the grip of something that destroys and deceives.

Therefore Christians are to shun this. This is part of the old life. You cannot put on Christ and indulge in loose talking, filthy speech, rotten words, corrupt conversation, whether it be obscenity, vulgarity, or idleness and gossip. Paul will come back to this subject later on, and we will take it up more fully then, but, in Chapter 5, Verse 4, he defines this a little more fully.

Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting, but instead let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. {Eph 5:4-5 RSV}

There is no choice for the Christian about this -- evil talk must be put off.

Years ago a friend of mine who owned his own print shop had a stranger come into his office who handed him a card and asked to have it reproduced. When my friend read the card he saw it was one of those obscene, lewd things that are in such wide circulation today. He handed it back to the man and said, "I don't print this kind of thing." The man looked at him and he said "Ah, come on! Don't be like that. You know you like this kind of things." And my friend looked him right in the eye and said, "You're right, there is something about me that is inflamed when I see something like this. I am tempted to look at it and read it. There is an old part of my life that responds to this -- but I don't intend to feed it."

Now that is putting off the old, putting off the flesh life. When you refuse to read a sexy book, or turn a deaf ear to some gossip or rumor, that is putting off the old life. "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths."

But again, that is not enough. If that is all you can say, that you do not do these things, you are still not living the complete, full, Christian experience. Put on! Put on Christ, "such as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear." That is always the true sign of Christianity. It is a concern for your influence on others. Say something positive, say something fitting in that situation, say something helpful. The whole matter turns on the quality of your influence. What are you doing to others by what you say? That is the question. Are your words like flaming darts that light fires in other hearts which smolder and burn and inflame their passions and after you have left them they have a battle to put down the flame that has been awakened, lighted by your words? Or are your words clean and wholesome, helpful and faithful, building up and encouraging people? The most sobering words Jesus ever uttered had to do with this matter of influence on others. James also speaks of this. The tongue, he says, is like a fire setting a whole forest aflame {cf, Jas 3:5-6}. If any man can control the tongue he can handle the rest of his life without difficulty. This is the test. The Lord Jesus said to his disciples "If any of you offend one of these who believe in me, it would be better for him that a millstone be hanged about his neck and he be cast into the sea and drowned," {cf, Matt 18:6, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:2}. Think of that. It is better to be drowned than to let your tongue be an offense or a cause of offense to someone else.

Yet how we Christians cling to these thoughtless ways of speaking. We fail to remember the influence we may have on someone else. One of the serious problems we have had in our Home Bible Discussion groups has been Christians who insist on talking about things that are an offense to non-Christians who may be present. But Christians insist on doing this, as though they had some right to it and are offended if they are asked to desist.

This last week Dr. Dick Halverson told me of an incident that occurred during Leadership Week. He was at one of the home meetings and was so captured by what was being said that he found himself saying in a rather subdued voice but loud enough so that others around him could hear, "Amen, Amen." The next morning a man came up to him, and, very graciously, in an obvious attempt not to be presumptuous, took him aside and said, "Dr. Halverson, last night you were saying 'Amen' at the meeting. Did you ever think that perhaps some non-Christians around might have been offended by that, that that kind of language was so totally alien to them that they would have misunderstood it. They would have thought they were with a bunch of religious fanatics and misunderstood?" And Dr. Halverson said to me, "I appreciate that man coming to me like that. It was true. I was carried away and didn't think. I'm so grateful that this man would take the time and effort to tell me that, and I'm especially appreciative of the spirit in which he told it to me."

This is all part of the whole process of Christian living in the world today.

This is what the world is waiting to see: Christians who are concerned about how others react to what they say, and the way they act.

I heard a story of a man who, one day, visited both heaven and hell. He went to hell first, and there he saw people who were starving and wretched and miserable, in terrible condition. He noticed that the problem was that everybody in hell had stiff arms. They could not minister to their own needs, they could not clean themselves up, or feed themselves, they could not do anything, so they were in misery. It was depressing to him, and he was delighted to have an opportunity to visit heaven. There he found people who were well fed, sleek and happy, enjoying themselves. It was just what heaven ought to be. But he noticed something remarkable. They too were suffering from the same problem. They all had stiff arms, and could not minister to their own needs. The difference was that, in heaven, they were feeding each other.

Prayer

Our Father, we ask that Thou wilt make us aware of the world in which we live and the Christ who lives within us and in practical, existential terms we may put off the old and put on the new. Help us to arrest the attention of people, not with pretense, not by a phony posture, nor with a facade of orthodox doctrine but by a genuine, authentic Christian life. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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