

## The Greatest Revolution

by Ray C. Stedman

As we begin this fifth biennial Missionary Conference with its theme, “Across the Street and Across the Seas,” ordinarily it would be expedient to interrupt our studies in the Epistle of First John and bring a special message in line with the missionary thrust. But I shall not do that largely because the passage at which we have arrived in John’s letter offers an ideal text for a missionary conference. I am sure that is more than mere coincidence.

We are looking at First John 3:4-5. These two verses give us the most penetrating analysis in the whole Bible of the reason for human distress and darkness. They also declare in one mighty sentence the answer of God to this human distress. Thus, they describe the message which for 1900 years has laid hold of hearts, both young and old, and compelled them to go out across the street and across the seas in the name of Jesus Christ.

**Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. {1 Jn 3:4-5 RSV}**

Now I would suggest to you that Verse 4 is a more profound identification of the source of all human heartache and misery than all the psychological books that have ever been written. “Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” Very recently, Billy Graham was invited to speak at the National Council of Churches Conference and said these words.

“We stand at the heart of a world revolution. Our world is on fire and man without God cannot control the flames. The fires of greed, hate, and lust are sweeping uncontrollably around our globe. We live in the midst of crisis, danger, fear, and death.”

There is not one among us who is not aware of the accuracy of these words. But what is the reason for these conditions? Why this unprecedented crisis on a worldwide basis in human history? The answer is one word: Lawlessness! There is a spirit of revolt abroad. These are revolutionary times, in the truest sense of the words. There is a widespread universal refusal to acknowledge authority in our day. There is a determination to please self at all costs, to do “what I want,” regardless of what anyone else wants. Therefore, the major characteristic of our day is this word of this ancient text – lawlessness! Lawlessness, both as a principle and as an activity, i.e., a lawless attitude within every heart, resulting in lawless acts by every person. That is the Biblical picture of humanity.

Now, do you challenge that?

Let me say it again. A lawless attitude within every heart, resulting in lawless acts by every person.

Do you deny that?

Are you mentally saying to yourself, “But I’m not lawless. It’s all right for you to talk about others this way, but don’t talk about me. I’m a law-abiding, respectable person. I’m not lawless.” I am not referring now to violations of the law of man when I use this term, just as the Scripture does not refer to violations of man-made laws such as traffic ordinances, etc. I suspect, however, that many of us would hesitate to be examined too closely even in this area. But I am speaking of law in its widest sense, law as an expression of the nature of things. That is, after all, what laws are. They are an expression of reality:

- We speak of the law of gravity. What do we mean? Why do we call it a law? Gravity is the attraction of one bit of matter toward another,

and we call it a law because it is inescapably there. It is real, it has to be reckoned with. There is no avoiding it, it is realistic. That is why it is a law.

- We speak of the laws of electricity, and we mean the way electricity operates, the way it works. We say these functions are laws because they invariably work in certain ways. That is the way things are about electricity.
- We refer to laws of being, by which we mean the way human beings are made, the fact that there are certain predictable responses we inevitably make which we call laws of being, they represent the nature of things.

Now, if law in its widest sense is simply an expression of realism, the nature of reality, then lawlessness is to behave as though there were no such laws. It is to behave unrealistically. Lawlessness is to become a law unto yourself, to make up your own rules for life and to disregard those that already exist. That is basically lawlessness. It therefore is to shut your eyes to reality – to ignore the truth, to act as though fantasy were reality.

Now, would any of you like the task of counting up your lawless acts, your lawless deeds? Those times when you have said, “Well, I don’t care what happens, I’m going to do what I want anyhow.” The occasions when you have misled others to believe you think one way when actually you think another. The times when you have told yourself, “Never again!” but you have gone right back and done it again.

“Oh,” you say, “I thought lawlessness was breaking out of jail and defying the cops, or participating in a demonstration or a riot.”

Well, that is one form of lawlessness, but that is only a form of it. Lawlessness is acting unrealistically, ignoring reality, acting as though there were no laws of being. It universally expresses itself in two general ways: in open defiance, and apparent respectability.

The attitude of open defiance has produced in our day this almost universal phenomenon of the Beat Generation – young people who are reacting against traditions, the conventions in which they were brought up, and who, in seeking to find freedom, have flung over the traces and are doing only what they want to do, in any form or shape or time

they please. But lawlessness is equally expressed through apparent respectability. This needs greatly to be said, because we who reject the open arrogant defiance of the Beatnik philosophy tend to draw our self-righteous skirts about us and regard ourselves as lawful individuals simply because there are aspects of law which we recognize and to which we submit ourselves. But the deadly principle of lawlessness is as much at work in the respectable crowd as it is in the defiant group, as Paul makes very clear in his first and second chapters to the Epistle to the Romans. There he examines both sides and says they are equally guilty. That this charge is true is obvious because of the presence of certain manifestations of lawlessness which are evident in the respectable group as well as among the defiant.

What are these activities of lawlessness? Essentially they are threefold: hatred, darkness, and death.

- Hatred, the violation of love;
- Darkness, the extinguishing of light; and
- Death, the destruction of life.

Now look at this mid-twentieth century world, with its love of scientific technological advancement, its fascination with the exploration of space, and its manifestation of confusion, uncertainty, and darkness on every side. Look at this world.

Look first at the respectable world. Is there not hatred there? Is it not evident in prejudice and haughtiness, in cattiness, in exclusive clubs, in selfish cliques, in indifference to the clamant needs of other human beings? It is manifest also in quarreling parents and resentful children, in bitter feuds within the home, in scheming acts of revenge against other individuals and groups, in broken homes, in the skyrocketing divorce rates, in neglected children, in cruelty that breaks out in a most frightening manner from time to time. At the root of it all is this principle of lawlessness; this acting as though there were no restraints, no rules, no laws in life; this rejection of reality.

Take darkness, the extinguishing of light. Is that not evident everywhere in the world, even in your own life? It is manifest in confusion, in uncertainty, in double-mindedness, in vacillation, in the freedom with which we change direction according to the expedient thing. It is evident in anxiety, in fears, tensions, in neuroses, in obsessions, and in

this fantastic wave of mental illness that is sweeping the world today. The root of it again is lawlessness, the refusal to recognize reality.

Take violent death. This is so disturbing to the world in which we live, the respectable world. It is supremely evident in war. I have great sympathy with those who are disturbed about the war in Vietnam. I do not subscribe to their outlook as to the cause of the war, or how to end it, but there is not a thoughtful Christian individual who can look at war and see it as anything but the utter madness of men. You can see this tendency to manifest lawlessness in the destruction of life in crime, in the violence that fills our streets, in murders, persecutions, and suicides. It is evident in the blank hopelessness that spreads like a pall of gloom across great segments of our society, in the despair and emptiness that fills human hearts. That is death.

Now I want to ask you, is this survey realistic? Am I describing life as it is?

Oh, I know there are other things in life. I know there is joy, I know there are moments of gladness, peace, and quietness, there are the good things of life. I know I am looking at the dark side of life right now, but that dark side is there, is it not?

It is interesting to note that the world is basically divided into two great warring camps. The antagonism and enmity between these two camps breaks out at all levels of society today. There is the radical, defiant group, and the respectable, apparently law-abiding group:

The radicals are looking at the respectables and saying, "You're all a bunch of hypocrites. You don't live like you say. You smother us, you're trying to extinguish all freedom, you want to make us conform to narrow channels of your own choosing, and we refuse to do so." They point the finger at the respectables and say, "The trouble with the world is you, your narrow, bigoted attitudes, your stuffy formalism."

On the other hand, the respectables are looking at the radicals and saying, "The real trouble is, you are all lawless. You have no respect for tradition or convention. You do not see the necessity for order and peace. You are trying to create trouble and foment revolution and riot, you are working to upset society wherever you go. The trouble with life is you!" But the Scripture, looking at the world in which we live, says both sides are equally afflicted with this virus of lawlessness – one mani-

festing it in one way, and one in another, but both sides equally to blame. "Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness, because sin is lawlessness."

Well then, what is the answer? What is the preeminent need of our race? What is the solution to these pressures and difficulties? It is rather obvious, is it not? It is as plain as daylight. The answer, obviously, is to take away the lawless spirit. Let us eliminate this basic cause of human disaster and distress. We must change the nature of man. Man himself is his own major problem.

General Carlos Romulo, for many years the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, stated the case precisely,

"We have harnessed the atom, but we will never make war obsolete until we find a force to bridle the passions of men."

He is exactly right. The answer is so obvious. Why do we waste time with surface manifestations, outbreaks of evil that are merely symptoms of an underlying disease? Strike at the disease, do something directly about the thing that is wrong, eliminate the basic cause.

But, though the answer is obvious, yet it is hopelessly out of our reach. It is, of course, precisely what we have been trying to do:

- We have tried education, and we now have the finest schools the world has ever seen, with the most literate percentage of population ever, but the problems mount on every side. Education has failed. It does not touch the root of the problem, it merely covers all with a veneer that in many ways makes it more dangerous.
- We have tried psychological treatment. That has been the great cry of our own generation. If we would raise up a host of men and women trained to understand the human mind and heart, and let the people come and talk to them to find out what makes humanity tick, then these things can all be straightened out. Well then, I ask you, why is it that the problems are greatly augmented now, thirty years or more after psychological treatment has been widely available, than they were before? This method is failing. The flood of lawlessness mounts on

every side. Psychology does not touch the cause.

- We have tried legislation and police enforcement, and these serve to contain the problem within certain limits, at times. But again, our generation is a standing testimony to the fact that these forces are failing. They cannot cope with the problems, they are too vast, too deep-seated, too widespread. Legislation fails.
- We have tried what I call “Bo Peepism,” i.e., “leave them alone and they’ll come home, wagging their tails behind them.” It too fails, more rapidly, perhaps, than any other plan. When you leave people utterly alone, evil seems to multiply tremendously. But because we do not know what else to do, periodically we run through the whole scheme again and try all the solutions once more, in a last, desperate effort to try to make something work.

Now, I suggest to you, is this not true? Is this not a proper analysis of what has been going on? Yet the problem mounts, the sickness worsens, anarchy spreads, and we have gotten nowhere.

Well, is there any hope? Are we doomed simply to destroy ourselves as a race? The Apostle John says, “No, we are not doomed to destroy ourselves. Yes, there is hope.” He puts it all in this one sentence:

**You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. {1 Jn 3:5 RSV}**

There is the great purpose of the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. He appeared, he was manifested, to take away sins. Linked with that is the great possibility revealed by it, “in him there is no sin.” Read it again, as John has defined sin, “He appeared to take away lawlessness, and in him there is no lawlessness.”

That is the glorious gospel of hope. There is a way, but there is only one way. That is like saying there is only one thing to breathe, air. Well, that is all you need, one thing to breathe. We only need one way out of this human dilemma, this racial problem. There is only one way because there is only One who has ever appeared in human history who can take away sins. I submit that can be es-

tablished categorically, dramatically, documentarily.

He does not do it by an act of magic. He does not wave a wand or utter some religious abracadabra and the thing is done – poof, suddenly you are free from sin, lawlessness is gone, you will never have any problem with it again. If that is your idea of Christian faith then you are badly misled and mistaken. But as we have been seeing through this letter of John, the Lord Jesus Christ has appeared to take away sins. How does he do it? He does it by the impartation of life, by the turning on of light, by the awakening of love. These are the things that answer the manifestations of lawlessness. What is lawlessness? It is that which produces death, darkness, and hatred:

- Death, the destruction of life;
- Darkness, the extinguishing of light; and
- Hatred, the violation of love.

What does Jesus Christ give? He gives:

- Life in place of death,
- Light in place of darkness, and
- Love in place of hatred.

When you receive Jesus Christ, that is only the beginning. The whole Christian life follows. As we have been learning, it is a process of growth, it is a sequence of development, it is something that gradually takes over more and more, but the results are inevitably the same:

- There is the taking away of sin,
- There is the elimination of lawlessness,
- There is the restoration to the human heart of order and peace.

That is not merely an empty claim. That has been the demonstration of over 1900 years of human history. Again and again in every generation, the hardest cases have responded to this amazing remedy – homosexuals, alcoholics, drug addicts, sex addicts, acid heads, murderers, thieves, everyone. Even more difficult cases have surrendered – the proud, the intellectuals, the bitter, the cynical, the angry young men, the jaded old people. And al-

ways there have been the despairing, the wounded in spirit, the hopeless, the pathetic, the pitiful, the lost, broken derelicts that float through life. Jesus touches every race – the Chinese, Indians, Negroes, Hottentots, Russians, Eskimos. No matter where or when man has lived it is always the same story, always the same deliverance, always the same results: The healing of lawlessness. The miracle occurs when men and women, boys and girls, come to know Jesus Christ and receive him into their life. Then the sickness begins to heal.

Have you ever thought of this? It is this healing miracle that has made human life possible for 1900 years. This morning there are out on the golf courses men and women who have no interest at all in coming to church. There are others on the beaches, and others lounging quietly at home in bed reading the Sunday newspapers. These are men and women who are utterly devoid of any interest whatsoever in reading the Bible and coming to church. They are enjoying themselves. They do not realize that they are able to do so only because the gospel of Jesus Christ has penetrated this culture and society enough to permit human life to exist and make possible such moments of enjoyment. Even those who are opposed to the gospel are able to enjoy themselves only because this salt has been at work in society, arresting the awful evil of human lawlessness which otherwise would have quickly and rapidly destroyed human life. Without this restraint the times would be so terrible that not one of us would have a moment's peace to live free from persecution, violence, threat, or fear. That is the effect upon society of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Think of it. It is what makes human society possible.

Will Durant, the famous historian, who has only recently finished his monumental book, *The Story of Civilization*, has this to say about Jesus Christ:

“The revolution that Jesus sought was a far deeper one, without which reforms could only be superficial and transitory. If we could cleanse the human heart of selfish desire, cruelty, and lust, Utopia would come of itself, and all those institutions that rise out of human greed and violence and the consequent need for law, would disappear. Since this would be the profoundest of all revolutions, beside which all others would be merely coup d'états of class ousting class and exploiting in

its turn, Christ was, in this spiritual sense, the greatest revolutionist in history.”

He went to the heart of the problem. He touched it at its basic issue. He deals yet with it right at the heart. “In him there is no lawlessness.” If you learn to walk and live and work in him, as Christianity makes possible, then you will know the same peace, the same ordered, restful activity that was “in him” 1900 years ago.

Now I want to ask you this: “Is there any message more important than this?”

- Can there possibly be any more challenging cause, any more effective calling than to have a part and share in this?
- What more significant thing can you ever do with your life than to have a part in this magnificent enterprise that changes the human heart at its deepest level?
- Do you not feel the call of the trumpet in that?

What a tremendous cause! What a triumphant claim! What a magnificent ministry!

Further, when you think that this has been backed by 1900 years of demonstration, during which men and women have actually, literally, been set free, delivered from this virus of lawlessness and have been restored to peace, blessing, order, freedom and liberty, then I ask you,

- What could be greater than this?
- What message is more needed in this world of ours than this?
- Shall we, the Christian church, turn away from the declaration of this message to some lesser thing?
- Shall we give ourselves to the mere salving of symptoms, or shall we give ourselves more fully to this message that sets men free?

– Across the Street and Across the Seas.

No wonder the Lord Jesus said, “This gospel must be preached unto all generations, and to all

nations; then shall the end come,” {cf, Matt 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:27}.

**Prayer:**

Our Father, our own hearts echo the challenge of this message with the recognition that we, too, have experienced this. Most of us are Exhibit A in this respect. We are being set free from the passion, the power, the dominance of lawlessness in our life; from self-pleasing, living for ourselves, and thus ignoring the nature of the world that you have made. Lord, we thank you for this. We know that there is still a great deal of it in us, but oh, thank God, the remedy is at work. The life of the Lord Jesus is more and more possessing us. We

are being changed by the Spirit of God into his likeness and thus into his lawfulness. Lord, we pray that we may have the high and holy privilege of being a part of this, the greatest cause of all, the greatest revolution of all, that we may see clearly that there is nothing greater that we could possibly give ourselves to than the thrusting forward of this mighty message, the making it possible for those who are still bound and sitting in darkness, despairing and hopeless, to hear, to see, to know and to be delivered. We pray that this week may be the time when we cease to reserve areas of our life to ourselves, but will give them over, completely and wholly, to this major cause that occupies and fills thy heart. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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