

The Mystery of Righteousness

by Ray C. Stedman

It is my great hope that there is coming to all, as we study together in First John, a growing awareness that every Christian must be a revolutionary because Christ is a revolutionary. God does not like the status quo. He is grieved and hurt by racial hatred, by war, by poverty, by unhappy homes, by human strife. God is a revolutionist: he is determined to protest these conditions, whenever and wherever they occur. But more than that, he is determined to correct them, to deliver men from them. Speaking generally, it would not be wrong to say that God is in full sympathy with most of the goals of the radical groups that exist today. He sees clearly the same things against which they are protesting. But there are two things that mark the difference between God's revolutionary methods and those of the radicals:

First, God thoroughly understands and identifies the underlying cause of these problems. He names it for us. We saw it last time in Verse 4 of Chapter 3 of First John: Lawlessness! That is the problem: a revolt against reality. It is not economic distress, it is not class warfare, it is not pressure politics behind the problem of human strife and unrest. All of these are symptoms of an underlying cause. The underlying cause is, simply, man rebelling against the laws of his own being. That is the problem. It is civil war in the heart of every man, both that of the radical as well as the respectable. In other words, men have already caught the disease they are trying so desperately to cure.

The second thing that marks the difference in God's approach to these problems is that he has, himself, already done the only thing that can be done to correct this. In the mystery of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he has provided a means by which to break the grip of this lawless principle upon human beings, and to permit us to become gripped, instead, by the more power-

ful principle of love – and all this done in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. This is what John declares to us in the verse we looked at in our last study,

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

Well, what is in him, if there is no lawlessness? Obviously, the trouble with us is lawlessness. We do not like something, and so we do not do it. Even though it is the right thing to do, even though we know it is for our best interests, if we do not like it, we do not do it. So we are lawless, whether we are respectable in other areas, or radical. This is the problem. But “in him there is no lawlessness.” Well, what is in him? Love. In him there is love. We have learned in Romans that love is the fulfilling of the Law, that when someone acts in genuine love he fulfills all the Law there is to be fulfilled. This explains the link between love and righteousness. Here is another one of the great terms of the gospel, righteousness. Anyone who fulfills the Law is righteous, and since love is the fulfilling of the Law, therefore, righteousness is love behaving. That is all it is.

We have already learned many times in our studies together that love is the very being of God, the essence of his nature, and thus of the nature of Christ. John says, God is love. Yet that life which is love, is also light. It illuminates, it clarifies, it dispels darkness, it breaks through our confusion and our lack of understanding and makes us see things as they are. We read of the Lord Jesus, “in him was life, and the life was the light of men,” {John 1:4 RSV}. So, with this threefold gift of love, of light, and of life, when Christ enters a human heart he destroys lawlessness. Lawlessness is

the destruction of life, the extinguishing of light, and the violation of love. Now what could be simpler, as a solution to the problems of life than that? That strikes at the very heart of discord.

That is why, as we saw last, the gospel is the greatest revolution of all times, the revolution that occurs at the deepest level of the human heart and life.

Now the great question is, "How do we lay hold of this threefold gift in actual daily practice?" How does the gift of love from Christ destroy and push out the lawlessness of our lives? In what way does it happen? We have seen it all before, but John now beautifully summarizes it for us in Verses 6 and 7 of Chapter 3:

No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he [Christ] is righteous. {1 Jn 3:6-7 RSV}

Here is the mystery of righteousness. John does not call it that, but Paul refers to it as "the mystery of God-likeness, or godliness" {1 Tim 3:16 KJV}, i.e., the way by which a man or a woman, or a boy or a girl, begins to live like God, to become God-like though remaining a man. To become God-like in his attitudes, his outlook, his actions and his reactions.

If you read the Old Testament, you know that certain men of olden times discovered this secret. They became, to a great extent, God-like, they lived like God. Abraham, for instance, Joseph, Moses, King David, and others. They became stabilized, outgoing, love-oriented, they became men in every true sense of the word.

The secret was hidden to most. Actually, of course, it has always been the same secret, it was Christ in them. That is forever the secret of God-likeness. But no one understood that in the Old Testament days, they could not because it had not yet become historically evident. But now, Paul says (and John and Peter and others), the mystery has been made clear. Paul calls this, in Colossians, "the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints," {cf, Col 1:26 RSV}. Let me share with you the full passage in which that occurs, as it is found in Phillips' translation.

I am a minister of the church, by divine commission, a commission granted to me for your benefit, and for a special purpose: that I might fully declare God's Word – that sacred mystery which up till now has been hidden in every age and every generation, but which is now as clear as daylight to those who love God. They are those to whom God has planned to give a vision of the full wonder and splendor of his secret plan for the nations. {Col 1:25-27a J. B. Phillips}

Did you hear that? God has a secret plan for the nations. That is at once the explanation of, and the remedy for, all the evil that exists in the human race. Now he goes on,

And the secret is simply this: Christ in you! Yes, Christ in you, bringing with him the hope of all the glorious things to come. {Col 1:27b J. B. Phillips}

Now those are not just so many beautiful words. That is a very practical proposition which God is working out through human history, and is making available to men.

Peter says the same thing in other words, in his second letter (the Living Letters translation):

For as you know Him better [i.e., Christ], He will give you through His great power, everything you need for living a truly good life: He even shares His own glory and His own goodness with us! And by that same mighty power He has given us all the other rich and wonderful blessings He promised; for instance, the promise to save us from the lust and rottenness all around us, and to give us His own character. {2 Pet 1:3-4 Living Letters}

That is the Good News. John puts it bluntly and plainly, "No one who abides in him sins." Or, to use the interchangeable term for sin which he has just given us, "No one who abides in him lives lawlessly."

Perhaps some will say, "Now, wait a minute! Isn't this a contradiction? In the first chapter, Verse 8, John says, 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' And now, in Chapter 3, he says, 'No one who abides in him [Christ] sins.' How is this? And isn't it even more positively put in Verse 9 of Chapter 3, 'No

one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.'" Surely this is a bit of a problem.

In Verse 6 he says a Christian does not sin; in Verse 9 he says he cannot sin, because he is born of God. Yet, again in Chapter 1, he says, "if we say we do not sin, we are liars"; and in Chapter 2, Verse 1, "if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

Admittedly, we have come to one of the most difficult passages of Scripture. But yet it is a very important one, and is not a contradiction. The man who writes this is no fool, he is an intelligent person. He does not say on one page something that contradicts himself on another page. He is an inspired apostle, and writes with wisdom, intelligence, and understanding. The problem does not lie in the text; the problem, if anywhere, lies with us. We must think this through, we must give our attention to this.

I propose, therefore, that we take some time with this passage because of its importance, that we might understand the working of the mystery of evil in human life, and, likewise, the mystery of righteousness which counteracts it.

We shall examine this problem in much greater detail in future messages, but, for the present, I will point out that the problem is really settled by the tense of the verb the apostle employs here, "No one who abides in him sins." He uses the present continuous tense for the word *sins* to mean "no one who abides in him keeps on sinning" or lives in lawlessness. If John had wanted to refer to a single act of sin there is a Greek tense that would have made it very clear. He could have employed the aorist tense which would then have said, without any question, "No one who abides in him can commit even one single act of sin." But he did not say that. He used instead this continuous tense, and to note this will help us a great deal in understanding the passage. So he is saying, "Any one who abides in Christ does not go on living in sin." He cannot live lawlessly, he does not keep on sinning.

But now do not miss the trees because we are so intent upon the wood. How do you avoid living lawlessly? How does one come to this place of not living sinfully? Well, as he puts it, it is all in this one word, *abides*. "No one who abides in him sins."

Remember that in Chapter 2 he had said, "And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears he may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming," {1 Jn 2:28 RSV}. The key is abiding. We have already seen that the relationship of a believer to Jesus Christ, involves him in two aspects. Abiding in Christ is an advance on simply being "in Christ." Our Lord himself spoke of these two aspects of a disciple's relationship to him. He described them by these words, "you in me, and I in you," {John 14:20b RSV}. Now those two aspects are very important:

1. "You in me" is to be in Christ. It is to believe, to receive Jesus Christ. It is to be joined in a union with him that results in new birth, the impartation of his life and love to us, by an act of faith. It is to receive him, to act upon his invitation to come into your life. When you do, you are "in Christ." You are in union with him. "You in me," that is the first union. But that is not the aspect John is describing here. That union does not necessarily result in being freed from the bondage of sin. Oh, it makes freedom possible, it is all potentially there, but in itself it does not result in deliverance. That is why, as we have seen, it is quite possible to be "in Christ" and go on living for a time in sin, lawlessly.
2. But it is the second relationship, "I in you," Christ in us, experienced by an attitude of faith, in which he makes his home in our hearts, that frees us from sin's reign. We allow him to live through us, we expect him to do so, in every moment of our experience. It is this that is called *abiding*, and it is this that results in freeing us from the bondage and the power of sin, so that we can live godly, God-like lives.

As you read through the Scriptures you discover certain things that are produced by this abiding relationship. In the great 15th chapter of John's gospel, Jesus said these words: "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit," {John 15:5b RSV}. So abounding fruit comes from this relationship of abiding. Abiding is abounding. The fruit, of course, is the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control. These are the marks of One who abides.

Later on in that same chapter, Verse 7, he says, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you,” {John 15:7 RSV}. Here effectual prayer is a result, not of being “in Christ,” but of “abiding in Christ.”

Are your prayers being answered? Are you seeing God at work in your experience? Are the things you ask for that are clearly in line with his great program or men coming to pass in the lives of individuals for whom you pray? This is the promise, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will [within that relationship], and it shall be done for you.”

Now John says, “No one who abides in him sins,” i.e., lives lawlessly. He is able to live God-like. Therefore, this relationship of abiding is very important.

“Well,” you say, “just what is it? This is what bothers me. I’ve heard all these great promises before – and God knows I want them – but it eludes me. What is this abiding, anyway?”

Well, let us ask the Lord again for clarification on this. Once again in the 15th chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus says these words, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,” {John 15:10a RSV}. That is putting it plainly, is it not? If you obey me, you will abide in me. “And he that abides in me ... bears much fruit,” {John 15:5}. “He that abides in me can ask whatever he will and it will be done,” {cf, John 15:7}. “He that abides in me will not sin,” {cf, 1 Jn 3:6a}. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,” {John 15:10}. Of course, that obedience is by faith; i.e., this is not an exhortation to give ourselves to a groveling, dogged obedience, saying, “Here’s a rule and I’ve got to do it.” No, no. It is an expectant obedience, an obedience that acts expecting him to come through to make it a joy. That is the whole secret. It is by faith.

Well, how does this work in practice?

Since Christ is in you, if you are a believer, you are in him and he is in you, then you need but set yourself to do what he says, expecting him to act, and the minute you start doing it, the power to carry it through will be there, to make you able to do it and to make it a joy.

It is like those Israelites in the Old Testament who were told to cross first the Red Sea and later the river Jordan. Here was a body of water before them, but the command of God has to go through

the water. It looked like suicide, utter foolishness. The worst thing they could do would be to plunge headlong into the depths of the waters. But, on each occasion, as the children of Israel stepped down and their feet touched the water, the waters parted and they went on through. It was when they acted on what they were told to do, despite any appearance that anything was happening, that it happened. Of course, this was not simply a thoughtless, spectacular miracle. It was a parable, designed to teach us how God acts.

When we hear his command to us, whether we feel like it will work or not, the whole idea is to obey. Act on it! Do what he says! When we do, we discover that the minute we begin to act, the power of God acts also. What we are hoping to accomplish will be accomplished. It works out as God said. We discover that God is at work within us. That is what Jesus means, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,” {John 15:10a RSV}.

This is also what Paul is saying to the Philippians. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure – the thing that pleases him,” {Phil 2:12}.

Do you find it difficult to love some, for instance? This is one of the most nagging, persistent problems of life. Someone treats us cruelly, or indifferently, and our natural reaction, stemming from our tie with Adam, is immediately to strike back, to avenge ourselves, to cut them off, don’t speak to them, or to say something caustic. We wish to avenge ourselves. But that is not the command of the Lord. His word is crystal clear. “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord,” {Rom 12:19}. Do not avenge yourself. He says, “Love your enemies... Do good to those who hate you and despitefully use you. Pray for your enemies,” {Matt 5:44}. “Love one another,” {John 13:34, 15:12, 15:17, et al}. But you do not feel like doing that; in fact, that is the last thing you feel like doing. You are like those priests who did not feel like putting their feet in that cold, dirty water of the Jordan River, either. But God had said to do it. And when the soles of their feet touched the water, they parted, and the people went on through.

So, when you set yourself to act toward this individual whom you are finding it difficult to love as love would act; if you do something that love would do to that individual; if you respond to him

as those who love him would respond; if you obey God, in other words, you will find that if you are expecting him to act, he will. The feeling of love will follow your act instead of preceding it, and you will discover that your whole relationship, your whole attitude, to the individual is different. You will see him no longer as an obstacle standing across your pathway, opposing what you want to do, but you will see him as a person with a problem – a problem like the problems you have had – who needs understanding and acceptance. Then the problem will clear up, as your problems have cleared up.

Are you tempted to lust? Are you tempted, in this sex-saturated society, to give way to lusts and desires of the flesh that you know are wrong? Well, there is plenty of it around today and in respectable circles, too. But the word of God is, “Flee youthful lusts, because they war against the soul,” {cf, 2 Tim 2:22 KJV}. It is not that sex is wrong. Sex is wonderful. Sex is what God made it to be; it is his gift to humanity. But the improper use of it is wrong. So God says, flee youthful lusts because they will destroy you, they war against you. Well then, obey them! Turn from them and turn to him in expectant faith and you will find there is an immediate sense of release, a flood of cleansing, purifying, love from him that makes your renunciation not an act of dogged, dismal determination, but an act of delight, of gladness and freedom. What a difference!

Even an unregenerate man, a non-Christian, if he wants to for one reason or another, can set his will against doing something that is harmful or wrong or evil, and can stop it. Certainly he can. But he will not have any particular joy in doing so. He will be acting from a grim, dismal determination to walk in this way, with no compensating light or gladness. But the difference for a Christian is that when he so acts, Christ is there. We obey him, and thus we abide in his love. Every act of renunciation against these forces that would destroy us results in an accompanying sense of glorification, of joy, causing us to rejoice in God’s grace.

If you have him, you can do these things. If you cannot do them, it is because you do not have him. That is why John goes on to add here, “no one who sins has either seen him or known him.” That is, so strong is our link with him, and so powerful are the cleansing tides of his life in us, that if we say we have Christ in us and do not show some

evidence of it, in increasing degree, then we have been deceiving ourselves. We do not have him at all. We have never seen him or known him. If you can live content with evil, without a struggle, deliberately doing what the Word of God declares is not right; if you can go on thus, and it does not particularly bother you, you have no struggle with it, then you have no right to name yourself a Christian. That is what John is saying. You have not seen him, you have not known him. Jesus Christ came into the world, and into your life, to destroy lawlessness. That is his goal. That is the revolution he is set on bringing to pass. If this is not happening, then you do not have him, for he will not change his purpose. He is moving to this end. This is what he came for, and this is what he will do.

You are only kidding yourself if you think you have him because you know many Bible verses or you can recite certain creeds, you have been attending church all your life, or your whole family is Christian. You are deceiving yourself. No, one who lives lawlessly has either seen him or known him.

So he concludes in Verse 7,

**Little children, let no one deceive you.
{1 Jn 3:7a RSV}**

Oh, they will try. There is much attempt today to put on a pious front and make it look real, but do not let them kid you. The true sign is this: “He who does right is righteous.” Remember, righteousness is love behaving rightly. He who acts that way (and that kind of love always involves self-sacrifice), it is because he is linked to the Righteous One. There is no other way to act righteously than that:

**He who does right is righteous, as he is
righteous. {1 Jn 3:7b RSV}**

It is interesting that in the original language here the pronoun *he* is literally, “that one.” It appears also in Verse 5. “You know that ‘that one’ appeared to take away sins.” And Verse 7, “Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as ‘that one’ is righteous.” It is almost as though John is seeing Christ standing there. So close is he to him, it is as though he were standing right there, and John refers to him as “that one.” He who does right is righteous because *that one* is righteous, and he is living in him. Because he is

living in him, there must be righteousness breaking out from time to time in that individual's life. It has got to be there. When a person discovers this and learns to abide in him, all the time expecting that one to be working in him, then he soon learns he cannot do anything without him. But he discovers that with him, he can do anything he asks.

That is why Paul says, "I can do all things, through Christ who strengthens me," {cf, Phil 4:13}.

Prayer:

What a wonderful revolutionary thing this is, our Father. What a glorious transformation of human life is involved in this.

How it searches us out and probes us, plumbing the depths of our conscious as well as our unconscious life, doing radical things to us, changing us from the inside out, from the bottom up. We thank you, Lord, that this is the continuing experience of those who come in contact with this glorious, wonderful Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and walks among men, who offers himself to us for this very purpose. Make us all here living examples of this revolutionary movement, challenging the status quo, refusing to accept things as they are, because we have caught a vision of things as they might be. We ask this in Christ's name, Amen.