

TRUE HUMAN POTENTIAL

by Ray C. Stedman

In our last study in Colossians we saw the siren song of theological error that was threatening to deprive the Colossian Christians of all vitality and vigor in their faith. And today, two thousand years later, the same error, under the guise of the New Age Movement, is luring thousands into spiritual slavery by offering them the secret of fulfilled human potential. It is sad to see these ideas being propagated by celebrity evangelists who are enticing people into concepts and mysteries that will only leave them disillusioned and enslaved.

But in chapter 3 the apostle Paul once again reveals, in even more precise detail, the true way to "be all that you can be"---the true human potential movement. Listen to his opening words:

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Recently I attended a Men's Retreat at Mount Hermon and enjoyed Tim Hansel's wonderful ministry of encouragement. One thing he said struck me forcibly. He declared the symbol of a Christian life ought to be "thumbs up." Not only does that mean "all is well," but it also, according to Hansel, is a reminder to Christians of where our true resource lies. How beautifully it fits this passage! Twice in this short section the apostle urges us to set our minds and our hearts on "things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." Just as the thumb points upward, so Christians are to look to "things above" for their help in living life.

At first glance it is hard to tell who are the Christians in this world. They are ordinary looking men and women, boys and girls. But according to the Scriptures, and in actual experience, confirmed again and again in many of our lives, being a Christian means we have an extra dimension to life. There is a hidden resource, an invisible reality, which the world does not have and cannot see. This is not referring to Christ being "up in heaven," lost in space somewhere! Rather, this refers to what Paul has talked about earlier in this letter, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." This extra dimension is not far removed in the reaches of space; it is right within the heart, an untouchable, invisible dimension within us. This is the glory of the Christian life and the secret of its power, joy and courage. If you have not discovered this yet as a Christian you have not yet begun to live as you can and should. This is what puts a smile on a Christian's face, even though he or she is in trouble.

"Set your hearts" on this hidden resource, is Paul's exhortation. He means our affections. Think with affectionate gratitude of what the Lord Jesus has already done for you and what he is to you now. This is not a form of escapism. It is not something you try to keep your mind on all day long, to the exclusion of business, family or home. It is rather something that when your mind is occupied with your family, work problems, or whatever, you also bring into it this extra dimension. Christ is part of that situation. That is what Paul means when he says, "your life is hid with Christ in God." Christ is involved with your activities. Remind yourself that whatever you are involved in includes also the person of the Lord himself. His wisdom, power and knowledge are all available to you. That is what Paul means. It ought to awaken our loving gratitude.

But not only our affections, but we are to "set our minds on things above." "Things within" would be a better translation. Paul is talking about our wills, our choices. Decide to do what you know from your knowledge of the word of the Lord he wants you to do. That is the secret of a life that has discovered how to really live. Your life, your daily activity, your thoughts are now tied to Christ. You do wrong if you separate yourself from him. You belong to him. The old godless, self-directed life is over, if you have become a Christian.

Also hope is set before us that when Christ manifests himself again all that we have been learning of how to share his life will become visibly manifest. God is moving toward a new age. That is why the New Age Movement is close to the truth, but it is not the truth. There is a new age coming. God is already at work

producing it---it has begun within us---but it is invisible to the world around. One of these days the curtain will be lifted for as Paul puts it beautifully in Romans 8, the whole universe is "standing on tiptoe, craning its neck, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God." That is the goal God is moving toward in this world. We see all the darkness and despair, the trials and hurt all around, but God sees a purpose that is developing more and more, moving toward a certain accomplishment that shall be fulfilled when Christ returns.

To sum this all up, Paul is saying that we are to continually remember who we are now, who we once were (but no longer are), and who we will be when Christ returns. That is the true basis for living a Christian life. Scripture calls it "walking with the Lord." I like that figure because a walk, of course, merely consists of two simple steps, repeated over and over again. It is not a complicated thing. In the same way, the Christian life is a matter of taking two steps, one step after another. Then you are beginning to walk. Those two steps follow in this passage. Paul describes them as, "Put off the old man," and "put on the new." Then repeat them. That is all. Keep walking through every day like that. That is how Scripture exhorts us to live. Today we will look only at the first of these two steps, what we need to "put off." Next Sunday we shall examine the second step, what we must "put on." Here, then, is what the apostle says we must put off:

"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming, and you used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived."

Everywhere in the New Testament, repeated in various ways, we find this admonition to "put off" and "put on." The first exhortation is always put off. If you are going to put on something, of course, you must first put off what you have got on. If a mother tells her ragged and dirty little boy, "Go upstairs and put on some clean clothes," he knows that the first step is to take off the ragged and dirty clothes. He will get his ears boxed if he puts clean clothes on over the dirty ones! He must put off the old first. That is also what the Scripture recognizes about us. We have formed habits that are wrong, sometimes without even realizing they were wrong. We have allowed ourselves to take on attitudes and actions that are definitely destructive and have been making our life a mess. But once we come to a new life we must "put off the old," so that we can "put on the new."

Here in the plainest of language Paul tells us what we must put off: "Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature" (i.e. your old life). Notice that all five of these terms have to do with our sexual powers. We are basically sexual beings. God created the human race in two sexes, and he intended it that way. Sex is a tremendously important part of life. It is designed by God to add flavor and excitement to all our relationships. Sex in the Bible is like a great river flowing through life which, kept within its banks, is a source of pleasure and power. When it overflows its proper banks it becomes destructive and, ultimately, disastrous. All that is behind the admonition to put off, first, all "sexual immorality." That word refers to all forms of sexual intercourse outside of marriage; what is called "fornication" elsewhere in Scripture; and adultery, which is sexual misbehavior by a married person with someone other than his or her mate. This is to be "put off" by all Christians. The Word of God is absolutely clear on this. There is no quibbling about these terms. They mean exactly what they say: "Put off all sexual immorality."

The second word is "impurity." It is the word for "uncleanness." It refers to what we would call perverted forms of sex---homosexuality, child abuse, and various strange and kinky sexual practices. They would all be covered by this one word, "impurity."

Along with these, "lust" is also to be put away. This refers to erotic passions which are aroused (especially with men), by visual things. Pornography clearly falls under this classification. Anything that is sexually arousing: literature, movies, whatever, is to be denied. It belongs to the old life. It is beyond the boundaries of God's river and becomes a very destructive thing.

"Evil desires" is closely associated with lust---it is mental uncleanness. It is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he said, "If a man looks after a woman and lusts after her in his heart (if he mentally plays over the picture of having sexual union with her), he has already committed adultery in his heart."

Lastly, we are to put off "greed, which is idolatry." When this word "greed," or "covetousness" appears in

Scripture without being linked with idolatry, it is referring, of course, to avarice, to lusting after money and the things that money can buy. But in this particular context, linked with this word, "idolatry," it is greed to possess another person's body. That, says Paul, is idolatry---a powerful longing to lay hands on some other person and possess his or her body. It is what is called "falling in love," or what the world calls "having an affair," in which you allow another person to become so dominant in your thinking that he or she takes the place of God to you. Listen to the words of some of the love songs that are popular today: "You're all I need," "I can't live without you," "Help me make it through the night." All these expressions are saying, "You are like God to me. I am looking to you to fulfill the deepest longings and yearnings of my heart." Anyone who has lived very long knows that such is an impossible demand. No human can fill that need. Those who mistakenly feel that a new affair, a new love relationship, is going to meet all the hungers of their life find themselves again and again disillusioned and ultimately despairing. Every affair becomes less and less satisfying. They find themselves at last drifting aimlessly, lost on the sea of life.

This has become so common today, as it was in the first century, that even Christians tend to accept these practices and to overlook the error of those who fall into them. The apostle says there are two things wrong that that acceptance. First, he says,

"Because of these, the wrath of God is coming" ("keeps coming"---continuous present tense).

Several manuscripts add the phrase, "on those who are disobedient." What do you think of when you hear the phrase, "the wrath of God"? Many think of it as a kind of divine temper tantrum; that God gets very angry and vindictively strikes you down in some way or other; lightning bolts shoot from heaven, or whatever. But Scripture declares that the "wrath of God" is simply his judicial reaction to evil: it is the way a Holy God reacts to a civilization or individual who turns his back on moral absolutes and tries to ignore moral laws. The first chapter of Romans gives a vivid description of what God does in such a case. He removes the restraints within society against evil and lets it have its way, allowing it to produce what evil always produces---death in the midst of life. Romans 6 says, "the wages of sin is death." We all suddenly find ourselves facing a flood of evil practices. The restraints that once kept evil under bonds and within bounds, are lifted, and evil practices flood the scene. Laws are flouted, morality is cast aside, evil is praised and defended on every side. Finally we reach a stage in society where almost anything goes and we cannot legislate against anything; the moral fabric of society is destroyed. It is easy to see that this is right where we are today. Historically, it is always a prelude to the break-up of government and the overthrow of the forces for law and order within society. This is how the Roman Empire, and many other empires in history, fell apart. These are moral absolutes which men never can break with impunity. That is what Paul is pointing out. You may think that nothing happens when you allow yourself to fall into immoral practices, but something is happening---God has not lost his power. He is quite able to react to evil, and he does react. He allows it to have its head. He removes angelic restraints upon this dissolution of society and nothing man can do can prevent it.

Lewis Smedes, a professor at Fuller Seminary, has put it this way:

Some rules are absolute. They roll like moral thunder through the ages, down the hills of every civilization and into the valleys of every culture. They hold all peoples everywhere to account, all classes, all creeds, rich or poor, ancient or modern. They come with an imperious claim to respect, everywhere, under all circumstances, in every nook and cranny of every individual's private or public existence.

Surely that describes the kind of moral absolutes we are dealing with here. Many people, old and young alike, often say, "What I do in private is nobody else's business." We hear that on many sides today, even in connection with the discipline of the church: "It is not your business what we do." But it is, because when individuals indulge themselves in this way God takes away the restraints upon evil and all of society is widely affected.

The second reason Paul gives is stated in verse 7:

"You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived."

If Christians fall into these practices, as they are doing in many ways and in many places today (and we have had manifestations of it right here at PBC as well), they are reverting to a lifestyle which no longer reflects their true identity. They are doing things that are no longer them! In Romans 6:14 we have one of the great verses of Scripture, a verse that has meant a great deal to me personally: "Sin shall not be your master, for you are not under law but under grace." Everyone knows that The Ten Commandments legislate, among other things, against adultery and sexual misconduct. "You shall not commit adultery," says the seventh commandment, while the tenth commandment declares, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." That is very plain and clear.

Now people rightly ask, "What is the difference between this kind of a demand that Paul is making here when he says, 'put aside all these things,' and what the law says? Isn't this putting us back under law?" Not at all. There is a big difference. When the law says, "You must not commit adultery," or, "You must not covet your neighbor's wife," it is saying to humanity in general, "You must stop even though you cannot stop. Inwardly you will fail, if not outwardly." That is what Jesus refers to in the Sermon on the Mount. The law addresses itself to an already fallen race. Man has, planted in his inner life, a seed of treason and he finds himself disobeying even when he wants to obey. Nobody can obey the law to the degree that God requires. Therefore, the only function of law is to condemn: it condemns us because we cannot, in actual practice, stop.

But that is not what Paul is saying. What he is actually pointing out in this letter is, "Now that you have become a Christian you are no longer what you once were. Something has happened. You must now stop because you can stop." That is what he means in Romans 6:14, "Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law but under grace." You have a new resource, a new power, a new life, a strong Savior who will be with you in every moment of temptation, and you can say, "No!" That is why you must stop. It is the difference between those under law and those under grace.

Going even deeper now, the apostle takes up some of the inner attitudes of our lives.

"But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these..."

If you thought you had come safely through the first list, fasten your seat belts.

"Now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Notice again, we are exhorted to stop doing certain things because we can stop. We are different, therefore we can act differently. That is the appeal of the grace of God. You have "taken off your old self." Paul described this earlier in this letter as "being circumcised with Christ." A change has come. You are no longer what you once were. Your life is no longer linked with the old Adam, but with the new Adam, who is Jesus himself. You have "put on the new self," which is growing and increasing in knowledge. The more you learn about this new life the more you will find you are able to say no to the old. It is increasing in knowledge, growing into the image of Christ its Creator.

So Paul begins the list of attitudes to renounce. First, we no longer need give way to anger. According to the Scripture, there is nothing wrong with anger itself. Here, it is an expression of anger that is in view, what one commentator accurately calls "impetuous name-calling or calculated insult." As believers, we must not do that any more. Jesus referred to this in the Sermon on the Mount. "If you call your brother 'Raca,' or 'you fool,' you are in danger of the discipline of God." That kind of behavior must go because it belongs to the old life.

The second word is "rage." This refers to temper tantrums, to any violent display or attack, by either word or deed, upon another person. That does not mean we will be removed from the temptation to do these things--the old life still hangs around--but we must remember that it is no longer us. We can say no and should say no, because we are new creatures in Christ.

The third word is "malice," that silent, hidden hatred of the heart that takes revenge in secret. Remember the

story of the boy who took revenge on his tormentors by spitting in their soup before he served it to them? Have you ever spit in anyone's soup? It is an act of revenge inspired by malice.

Then, fourthly, "slander." That is an attack on another person's character, whispering things about him, whether true or untrue, that destroys his reputation in another's eyes. That is slander. You can be sued for that in the world, because even the world recognizes it is wrong.

The fifth word is "filthy language," which is foul talk, crude and coarse words, or expletives which Christians might resort to in a time of sudden pain or hurt. You all know the temptation to do this, but it is to be put away because it is not you any more. I find many Christians are confused as to just when they are being hypocritical. Nobody, of course, wants to be a hypocrite. But many Christians think they are being a hypocrite when they know that inwardly they have evil temptations but nevertheless they go to church and sing the hymns, etc. What the Bible says, however, is that a Christian is a hypocrite when he gives way to those wrong things. That is when he is no longer being what he really is. You are being your true self when you praise God and respond with love, joy and peace. That is when you are real. You are a phony, a hypocrite, when you give way to evil attitudes and practices.

The sixth word is "lying," untruth that breeds suspicion and destroys trust. Perhaps we all secretly agree with the little boy who was asked what a lie was and replied, "A lie is an abomination to the Lord, but a very present help in time of trouble!" But we pay a terrible price for lying by destroying trust and awakening suspicion. We find it hard to win our way back to being trusted again. How vividly that is being displayed in the present political climate of our country.

Finally, we have this word in verse 11:

"Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

If you detach that from its context it sounds like a great statement of the Oneness of the body of Christ, which, of course, it is. There is a parallel verse to it in Galatians, one that is widely quoted, which includes also the distinctions of sex: "neither male nor female in Christ." That is a marvelous expression of the Oneness of the body. But in this particular context, dealing with putting off the expressions of the old life, this verse is saying that we can no longer excuse wrong conduct on the basis of class, background or origin. Have you ever heard a Christian say, "I know I have a temper, but I can't help it. I'm Irish. All Irishmen have hot tempers." This is the kind of thing Paul describes. There is no longer to be any of that for you are no longer what you once were. Someone else says, "I'm Italian. That is why I lust. All Italians are hot-blooded." Or, "I'm stingy, but I'm Scotch." Or, "I'm blunt, but our whole family is that way." No, says Paul, we no longer can retreat to that kind of excuse for we are no longer what we were born to be. All such background of class, national origin, training, education, whatever it may be, is all set aside because you are now linked to Christ. "Christ is in all"---all believers---and, therefore, we all have what it takes to say no to wrong and (as we will go on next week to see), to say yes to God, so that our lives are filled with love, peace and joy.

We are filled with courage and undaunted confidence that life is not repressive and dull, but an adventure in which we are being led into every situation, trial, hardship, or whatever, to test us and to help us to learn that the One who goes with us is able to take us through. We are to "look unto Jesus." That is the exhortation everywhere in Scripture. He will take us through the present trial and make it into a blessing. "Your sorrow," he said to his disciples, "shall be turned into joy." That is how a Christian ought to live---joyfully---because of this great truth.

"But you brethren are not in darkness so that the Day of the Lord should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness, so then, let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled, for those who sleep, sleep at night and those who get drunk, get drunk at night, but since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breast-plate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet, for God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

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