

The Human Dilemma

by Ray C. Stedman

I hope that you have already noted, in your reading of the book of Ephesians, this tremendous letter which so helpfully unfolds to us what life is all about, that its great theme is the unifying work of Jesus Christ, the restoring work of Jesus, how he has come to smash every barrier among men, to span every chasm, to break down every obstacle which divides and fragments humanity, and to unite all things together in him. (And he has already begun. This is not something he is going to do in one blinding flash at the end of time. The good news of the gospel is that he has already begun.) To do that requires, as Paul says in Verse 19 of Chapter 1, “what is the immeasurable greatness of his power.”

Last week we looked at Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian Christians and noted how he beseeches God that all his readers will understand, will come to grasp the amazing greatness of the power of God. Because if you take note of the power of God your life is never the same. When you really see the resources made available to us in Christ, and they begin to hit you with the impact that they deserve, you will never live the same way again. That is why Paul prays that the power of God may be evident to us, the power which breaks through the problems of men, and restores harmony and peace and joy in the midst of death.

But you will never understand these problems, as the apostle goes on to show us in Chapter 2, until you grasp the difficulties which our Lord faces, the condition of mankind in its lost state, how absolutely impossible it is for man to do anything to change himself. It takes the great power of God, and nothing else will suffice. That is the theme of the first half of Chapter 2. Then, in the second half, Paul deals with another obstacle which hinders the unifying work of Jesus, and that is the alienation of the Gentiles from the Jews, the fact that there was a division in humanity, a sharp and severe cleavage which kept the vast majority of the

people on the earth away from the knowledge of God. He shows how this has been dealt with. I offer this as a preview of the general outline of the second chapter of Ephesians.

But now, in this first section, Paul takes a look at the condition of man. As we read the first three verses, I would like you to remember that this is probably the most difficult truth in all of Scripture for human beings to believe. Here at the outset of this section is the revelation of a truth so difficult for us to understand and grasp, and believe, that most of us tone it down immediately, we simply water it down. We don’t accept it; we won’t believe it. As a consequence we have no realistic outlook on where we are – either on the tremendous hopelessness of our condition if we are without Christ, or on the glory and the wonder of our position if we are in Christ. But if you want to have your heart set on fire, listen carefully to these verses so that we might see what is the immeasurable greatness of his power which has cured this condition.

In the Revised Standard Version the first phrase of this chapter is, “And you he made alive...” But the translators borrow these words from a little later on in the chapter. Paul doesn’t really say that at this point. He is so intent upon getting before people the description of humanity and its problem that he just runs right on, ignoring grammar and everything else. This is a most ungrammatical sentence in the original Greek. But the translators bring this phrase in at this point in order that we will get the point Paul is driving toward.

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our

flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. {Eph 2:1-3 RSV}

There is the apostle's great **analysis of the problem**. This is the difficulty which Jesus Christ faces when he comes to a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. And what it takes to break through this condition is nothing less than the immeasurable greatness of his power.

I said that this is difficult for us to believe, and it is largely because of the summary of the general state of man which Paul gives right here at the beginning. He says that you are dead, or you were dead, in trespasses and sins.

It is extremely difficult for us to believe that we are dead. If you come to a high school kid who is ready to go out for football, feeling the challenge of a new sport, involved with his friends in all kinds of exciting activities, and looking forward to building a life of his own, and you say, "You're dead," he will look at you with pity in his eyes. "What kind of person are you, some kind of nut?"

But listen to Paul's analysis and I think you will see what he means, and how accurate this description is. For there are two basic characteristics of death which we immediately associate with a dead person. I haven't had a lot of contact with dead people, but I'm sure that these two are always in view:

- One is their utter impotence, their powerlessness: Just before I stepped up here to speak, Roy Bradford was telling me that listening to this message in the first service this morning reminded him of an incident when one of our young men in this church, who was working part-time at a mortuary down the street, and living there, took Roy on a tour of the place one night. They came into the room where the bodies were lying out on slabs, and he pulled back a sheet and said to Roy, "Tell him about Jesus." Roy said, "I've never forgotten that! How impotent is a person who is dead! How impossible it is to reach him. How difficult, how absolutely hopeless it is for him to respond to any appeal, to do anything constructive in his condition." So impotence is the first mark.

- The second is corruption: The reason mortuaries exist is that dead bodies tend immediately to deteriorate. They decay, they fall apart, they lose their consistency, they begin to rot, to smell. You remember that in the story of Lazarus, Martha said to Jesus, "It's too late, already he stinks. He's been dead four days," {cf, John 11:39}. That is also a mark of death – corruption.

Impotence and corruption: The apostle uses two words here which relate to those two conditions, and these are the reasons why he says that men without Christ are dead:

1. First he uses the word *trespasses*, they are "dead through trespasses."

Do you know what a trespass is? This is a word which comes from a basic Greek word which means "to miss your step." If I start to walk off this platform and I aim at the first step, but I miss it and come down on another step, that is a trespass. I have misstepped. I didn't intend to; I aimed at the top step and intended to hit it, but I missed it. Though my intention was right, the result of my action was wrong.

This is what Paul says characterizes humanity. We are guilty of missteps. We don't mean to do it, but we end up missing the way. We start out with great ideals, most of us, with an image of what we would like to be. We aim at that, we try to be that, but somewhere we miss the mark, don't we? We don't fulfill our ideals, we don't realize our dreams. And even when we achieve the things we thought we wanted, we find them to be hollow pleasures indeed, empty and unsatisfying. Many of us suffer from that widespread disease of our day called "destination sickness," the malady of having arrived where you wanted to go, but not liking it when you get there, and remaining unsatisfied. That is the impotence of human life. We cannot fulfill our best ideals. No matter how hard we try, how much we resolve, something keeps us from them. That is a mark of the death which is present in humanity everywhere.

I was in San Diego this past week with the National Youth Workers Conference. Present there was Os Guinness, the brilliant young as-

sociate of Dr. Francis Schaeffer. He has written a book containing some very penetrating studies and analyses of present thinking among men. He has read all the books that the thinkers of today are writing about the future, about what is coming, and about what mankind can do about it. He has analyzed them very carefully. He has noted the polarization which exists in human thought between the extremes of a complete and utter pessimism, a stark, realistic pessimism which sees no hope whatsoever for the future beyond a few short years ahead – most of the books are like that – or naive and completely unrealistic optimism, such as is reflected in Huxley's *Brave New World*, which says that, despite all the problems, somehow we are going to work it all out. The mass of humanity swings desperately back and forth between those two extremes.

As he wrote his book, as he analyzed each bright, new, promising hope that men of this caliber set forth, he found the fatal flaw in each one – the fact that it would not work, could not work, does not work, has not worked when tried before in history. Gradually, he said, there came upon him as he studied an intense depression of spirit. He felt simply overwhelmed by the emptiness, the hollow mockery, of this kind of situation. And when he put it all together in a book he chose for the title these words: *The Dust of Death*, because that is what he experienced – the dust of death. He said that he came back to the Scriptures and to the resurrection of Jesus, and he saw that resurrection as a fresh wind blowing through all the dust of humanity's hollow dreams.

This is what Paul is saying. There is this well-intentioned, misstepping tendency within man which marks his death.

2. But beyond that, there are our sins. There are not only the times we fail when we meant to do right, but there are times when we intentionally and deliberately do wrong. Sin is the violation of truth when we know it to be truth. This is what creates the downward slant, the deterioration of life.

Most of us start in, as I have said, with rather high ideals and wholesome attitudes. We approach life, many of us, with good moral standards because of the homes and training

and background we have had – not all of us, but many. And we are the ones who find it most difficult to believe this passage. Yet all of us can remember that some of the things we do now with utter disregard, and total acceptance, horrified us when they were first suggested to us. And even when we first did them, we were uneasy of spirit. But now they have become commonplace, and we indulge without any difficulty at all. That marks the downward trend, the deteriorating faculty in life. This is a mark of death, an increasing corruption which, when it begins to be evident all over as our population explodes, produces this awful, terrible sense of despair and hopelessness and corruption which troubles us so on every side in human society today.

Now, that is Paul's analysis. See how accurate it is when you set it against life. No other philosophy can ever explain human life adequately. This is the condition of man.

Now Paul moves to **the explanation** of this. What is behind all of this? Why is this so universally true? His answer is three-fold. There are three forces at work, he says:

1. The first is:

**... following the course of this world,
{Eph 2:2b RSV}**

Literally it is, "following the age of this world." The age in which we live has a certain characteristic, a condition, and we are pressured by it. We are made to conform by the age in which we live. This is so demonstrable in life, isn't it? By *world*, Paul is referring to human society apart from God, not the earth itself, with its mountains and lakes and trees, etc. – that belongs to God – but the world, secular society, trying to live apart from God, determined to work out all its problems without any reference whatsoever to God. That world will produce a tremendous pressure to conform, to be governed by the world.

Haven't we all felt it? This is why fashions are always so powerfully influential among us. We hardly dare be different. Or if we are different, we break away completely

and form another society whose members are made to conform within it. That is why you never see a hippie with a crew cut. They don't like crew cuts. They reject short hair because that is a pattern they have learned to associate with something else they reject. But in the world of hippiedom everybody must have long hair. You must conform to that. And if you try to break away from it you will form a new society, a new pattern, in which it is the style, de rigueur, to have medium-length hair. But in any case, you see, there is always this pressure to conform.

But conformity is not only in the realm of fashion; it is in the way we react, in our attitudes. We are governed by the attitudes of our associates, and we are pressured to conform by our peers around us. That is the world, and what tremendous pressure it exerts! How it rejects anybody who is noticeably different!

That is why the world hates genuine Christianity. Genuine Christians belong to neither of the extremes which are always present in society. They have to contrast with both. And therefore they get attacked from both sides, if they are really standing where Christ stands. One of the indications of whether your Christianity is genuine or not is whether you do get attacked from both sides, because Christianity is a third way of life.

2. Yet beyond the world, says Paul, lies something else – a sinister being. He calls this force

... following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. {Eph 2:2c RSV}

Do you see how he is taking us back, back, behind the facades, behind what we call the normal activities of life. He is tearing off the veil and revealing to us what is really there. He says that there is an organized realm of malevolent beings, headed by a ruler of incredible subtlety and power who is at work behind the world scene to create disobedience. That is the Devil's stock in trade – disobedience.

Paul calls him "the prince of the power of the air." I don't think he means literally the

oxygen/nitrogen mixture we breathe, although perhaps – who knows? There may be some hint to that effect here. Who knows but that the Devil has in some way twisted the physical atmosphere. I'm a bit tempted to pursue this idea and to see what might be involved in the thought that the very air we breathe is more than polluted, that it is twisted. But this is at least a metaphorical reference to the fact that as the air pervades our environment and yet is invisible to us, so the Devil and his angels, and all the vast realm of demonic beings arrayed against God, are surrounding us on every side, invisible to us and yet constantly manipulating the human race by means of the pressures of the world and, as we'll see later on, the flesh, affecting the minds and hearts and thoughts of men so that they act disobediently.

Well, disobedient to what? You must have something to obey in order to be disobedient. What is Paul referring to? It is truth. The God of truth is always trying to capture our attention and to set reality before us. But there is an evil spirit at work in society which is constantly saying, "When you see it as truth, don't do it!"

You can illustrate in a thousand ways how that works out. It is amazing what a commitment we have to disobedience! This is why we have to have litter laws, for instance. It should be sufficient merely to point out to people that if you throw beer cans along the road you are going to destroy the beauty of the road. Merely putting up a couple of signs to remind people of that fact ought to be enough. But it isn't, is it? People throw the cans out and hit the signs which say: DON'T LITTER. There is a disobedient spirit at work.

This is why our initial reaction to some demand is almost always, "Why should I? Who do you think you are? Why should I do what you ask?" Or even, if someone requests something of us, our first reaction is "Well, tell me why. I want to know that first." There seems to be a tinge of disobedience about almost everything we do. Why is that? The apostle says that it is because a disobedient spirit, one who is constantly challenging every single law and force which God has called into being, is at work. He is assaulting us and

working through us, constantly trying to get us to be disobedient to the truth that we know.

3. Now Paul goes further, bringing this right down to the individual. We have looked at society, back of which is the malevolent cruelty and malicious design of the Devil, a being of incredible power, subtlety, and wisdom, with whom none of us is able in any degree to match wits – he'll trap us every time, as he has all through the history of the world. But when it comes right down to it, it comes right out at the individual level. Paul adds,

Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh [literally, the desires of the flesh], **following the desires of body and mind,** {Eph 2:3a RSV}

That brings it right out to where you and I live, doesn't it? The *passions* of the flesh is an individual matter. Paul uses a Greek word here which is used elsewhere in Scripture, many times, both for good and bad. He calls them the "lusts of the flesh," the passions or the desires of the flesh.

Don't immediately read that as being bad. The flesh is our basic human nature. It is the way we human beings are constructed. We live in a body of flesh and bone. But the Scriptures indicate that something has happened to that flesh, that something has gained control of it and has begun to twist it, and Paul shows us in a moment just what that twist is. But there are also good things about the flesh. That is, there are basic desires of the flesh which God created. Among them are hunger and thirst, the desire for sex, the desire for attention, for acquisition of goods, and the enjoyment of pleasure – all these things. And there is nothing wrong with them. Jesus used the very word which here is translated *passions* when he said to his disciples in the upper room, "With great desire have I desired to eat this passover with you," {Luke 22:15}. Literally, "With much lust have I lusted to eat this passover with you." So lust is not always wrong, and the apostle recognizes that this is the case. We human beings have normal, natural desires – we want to eat, we want to drink, we want to

sleep, we want to have sex. These are perfectly proper desires.

But Paul uses another term here which shows that there is a twist to them. The satanic treachery comes out at this point – what is translated here "the desires of the body and of the mind" is a subdivision of these passions of the flesh. The word he uses for "desires" is really the word *will*. It carries with it the thought of an unbreakable resolve, a determination. Perhaps the nearest English equivalent today is the word "drive." These passions become drives. And when they become drives, they become wrong. That is the subtlety of this.

What is wrong with eating? Why, nothing! If you don't eat, then you won't live. But where do we cross the line between a normal satisfying of our appetites and a normal enjoyment of food for pleasure – because God made us that way – and gourmandism and gluttony, where we live for eating, where we keep records of all the restaurants that serve the finest food, where we study them and we plan feasts and we build much of our life around them, and thus we sacrifice the relationships of life which are truly important in order that we may indulge in eating? Then it becomes a drive, it masters us. That is what Paul is talking about here – the drives of the body.

What is wrong with sleeping? Nothing. (Some of you are catching up on it right now!) But when you try to spend much of your life sleeping and allow it to interfere with the normal development of your life, then it becomes a drive, and that is wrong.

What is wrong with sex? Do I have to illustrate how twisted we are in this area? There is nothing wrong with sex. God made it. It is a perfectly proper practice of humanity. God likes it; he designed it. But when it becomes a drive that we build our life around, that we must have, to which we sacrifice other values, then it becomes idolatrous and is one of these drives, these inordinate passions, "inordinate affections" Scripture calls them elsewhere, or sometimes it calls them "deceitful urges" – promising us much but delivering little.

And then Paul moves on to show that these drives involve not only the body – these things which concern our physical life – but also the

mind, the thought life. This too can be an expression of the lusts of the flesh in this wrongful sense. Here we have attitudes such as indignation and hurt, and emotional responses such as attraction to people, etc. Are these wrong? No, they are right. But when they become jealousy and envy and malice and bitterness and desire for revenge, they can seize us and enslave us. They can begin to run our lives so that we build our lives around them, so that everything we do is related to some terrible envy – we want to show that we are better than someone else – or we want to get even with someone and so we spend hours and hours of our life planning and scheming and maneuvering and manipulating, trying to get revenge. That is a drive, a will of the mind.

Or take other perfectly normal things, e.g., reading books. That can be terribly wrong. It can become a controlling passion in our lives, which is wrong. Anything which controls us, for which we begin to sacrifice normal relationships, and which begins ultimately to enslave us, is the very sort of thing he is talking about here.

This is what produces the trespasses and sins which mark the death of humanity:

- Do you see how subtle this is, how widespread, how deeply embedded in life, how inescapable it is?
- Who of us can win over this?
- Who can distinguish when we've passed the line?

None of us is capable of it. That is why the condition of humanity is hopeless.

Now look at how it all comes out. **The inevitable results**, Paul says, are:

... and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. {Eph 2:3b RSV}

We are children of wrath. We are subject to the “wrath of God.” I don't know what that term means to you. I was teaching the book of Romans

to a group of Young Life leaders this week. We were discussing this subject. It became apparent to me that they had very mistaken ideas of what this means. They felt that it were as though some kind of a cosmic, terrible-tempered Mr. Bang is sitting up in the heavens, ready to torture fiendishly anybody who steps out of line, as though God is looking down at us as we try to struggle on and live our normal lives, and is shouting down at us, “CUT THAT OUT, OR I'LL ZAP YOU!” That is the usual concept of the wrath of God. But that isn't what this term means.

Paul analyzes it for us in Romans. The wrath of God is what we might call “the law of inevitable consequences,” the fact that what we do will have consequences. If we make a wrongful decision it will affect us, it will hurt us – even though we intended it to be right.

If I should suddenly decide to stride off and walk right into that wall I would suffer the wrath of God. I would be hurt by it. That wrath is designed to awaken me, to make me realize that I am violating a basic law of my own nature.

If I shove my hands into my pockets and nonchalantly decide to stroll off the top of a 20-story building with a hope that I'll make it, I'll suffer the wrath of God. It would be what you'd call jumping to a conclusion!

There are a lot of people who are acting that way these days. Art Linkletter's daughter jumped out of a window because, deceived by psychedelic drugs, she thought she could fly. But she suffered the wrath of God – even though she intended to do right.

Why is it that we accept the wrath of God in those physical terms and don't struggle with it – we know life is that way – but when it moves into the moral realm we get all upset? We say, “It isn't fair. Why shouldn't I run off with my neighbor's wife? Why shouldn't I find the happiness I desire after years of having to live with this slob I've been married to? Why should I experience any evil results from that?” But it is the same kind of law which applies, the same situation. And evil results will come, inevitable consequences which will destroy our humanity, tear down the beauty of human dignity within us. We will become brutalized, dehumanized, depersonalized – all these terms which are being thrown around today. That is the wrath of God.

And we are subject to that, Paul says, because of these great forces at work: the Devil, with his clever, subtle strategies, working through the world to force us to conform to patterns which destroy, and working through the flesh, so that we never know where to draw the line and thus we move in utter naivety from a normal satisfying of human need into that excess which destroys.

And, Paul says, furthermore, it is “by nature.” Don’t miss those two words. They mean that we are born this way. We are born into this condition, and there is nothing we can do about it!

I don’t know how to make that any clearer. Ultimately, education, legislation, a change of environment – all these “remedies” which we propose as releases from this condition – will rearrange the pattern but will never change the basic problem. That is why humanity struggles endlessly trying to correct itself but never succeeds, never succeeds!

Do you know of any other philosophy which can explain life in realistic terms like that, which squares with history as that does? We are born into this condition. There is no escape, no way out. We are part of a fallen humanity.

So, Paul says, we are “like the rest of mankind.” It is universal. It isn’t a question of race or sex. It doesn’t matter whether we are men or women, whether we are born into a civilized country or reared as savages in the jungle – the condition is still the same. There is no escape, no escape – except for the next two words, “But God, ...” {Eph 2:4a RSV}.

Now, you see, if you want to learn how to value your salvation and to praise God with a heart which is simply enraptured by what God has done, you need to understand the depths from which you have come as a Christian, the condition from which you have been released. The condition is still present in our Christian lives whenever we choose not to act upon the available resources of Jesus Christ within us. But in the non-Christian there is no hope without God, no hope.

And if anything should make us praise God, it is to understand this tremendously hopeless condition in which humanity is lost, unable to help itself, struggling, miserable, wretched, unfulfilled, unsatisfied, getting worse and worse, more corrupt, and trying in all sincerity to find answers on every side – and nobody puts down the efforts of men to try to find a way out – but we’ll never, ever, handle life properly, or understand history, until we accept this divine revelation of the condition in which we live. Then we can say at last, “But God,” but God, ...”

That is where we are going to start next Sunday.

But if you are recognizing now that you are in this condition, the answer will lie in what God has said about Jesus Christ, and in no other place, “for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” {cf, Acts 4:12}, but the name of Jesus.

Prayer:

We praise you, our heavenly Father, for the fact that you are such a God of realism and truth that you dare to tell us the truth even though we don’t want to hear it. You lay it before us in the simplest of terms, and we hide our eyes from it and run from it and refuse to look at it, refuse to say that it applies to us, but nevertheless it does. And, our Father, in love you pursue us and work with us and bring us to experience your wrath, until we see how foolish we’ve been and how stupid we are, and turn at last to the one way out provided for us. Thank you for our Lord Jesus. How we rejoice in him who came and entered the race so that we might find the way out. We thank you for this and ask that it may become clearer and clearer to us, and that we will rejoice and give thanks and live to the praise of your glory because of it. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

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