

ON GETTING ALONG WITH ONESELF

by Lester J. Start

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First Baptist, Kalamazoo

The sermon title may sound odd. We usually speak of the concern of getting along with others, of learning how to live with other people. And this indeed is the focus of the Christian life. It is the law of love. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind and thy neighbor as thyself. On these commandments, says Jesus, hang all the law and the prophets. And so we concern ourselves with the need for treating others in the spirit of Christian love, and in this context recognize the need for forgiving others their trespasses even as we pray to God to forgive us ours.

And yet with all the concern about getting along with others, there is another basic concern, and that is in getting along with ourselves. We have to learn to live with others, but we have to learn to live with ourselves, too. We have to express love to others. But what about our basic attitudes to ourselves? What happens when we really don't like ourselves very much, when we are discouraged by what we are, when we don't feel good about ourselves. We are told over and over again by the salvationist psychologists how important it is to feel good about yourself, and how to find all the things you like about yourself as a technique to develop good feelings. What do we do, though, when there is something about ourselves we cannot like, some compulsive behavior pattern we cannot control; we find ourselves addicted to smoking, for example, although we hate the habit, or addicted to some other substance like alcohol, and don't like what it is doing to ourselves? Or what do we do when we recognize that we have through our actions done something stupid and harmful to hurt or to alienate someone we care for deeply, and we are filled with remorse and self-condemnation for our action? How many of us have not regretted angry words we have said, meanness done, thoughtless injuries we have occasioned, and some which were not thoughtless but intentioned, and then found it hard to live with the guilt and remorse that now plague the self? What do we do when we are so disgusted and discouraged by what we have done, or worse, by what we are in our continuing actions as a way of life that we find it hard to live with ourselves because of our revulsion. How do we do with ourselves what we are counseled to do with others; that is, to forgive trespasses of the other so as to restore a relationship? How do we forgive ourselves the injury, the trespasses, the debts incurred by those very same selves? How do we forgive ourselves, and so remove the self-condemnation, guilt, and remorse that tear away at the very fabric of our lives?

First of all, I suppose it is possible to try to ignore the guilt, to excuse it (after all, I can't help it) or to accept it, even as some kind of badge of recognition. We can say, for example, "I guess I'm just the kind of person who can't control his smoking, or eating, or drinking, or anger." We can say "That's just the way I am", like the character in Thurber's story who said, "Everybody has some weakness: wickedness is mine." But this is like nursing a grievance in our relationship with others, refusing to forgive, accepting the occasion of hurt or injury as permanent, keeping the spirit of alienation instead of reconciliation. But as we can see, refusing to forgive others is harmful to ourselves as well as to the one unforgiven — and the situation which cannot in this way be remedied. And when we in effect accept our shortcomings, our faults, our compulsive

behavior, our sins as the way we are in ourselves, we, of course, are assenting to those very destructive forces that alienate ourselves, that make us deep down so dissatisfied. Acceptance of the alienating behavior freezes the self in its mold, admits of no chance of improving it, and soon, in spite of what we say about accepting ourselves for what we are, we find the bitterness of self-condemnation ever ready to re-emerge. We need to forgive our faulty selves; this is not to accept them for what they are, but somehow to make use of the creative love that redeems the situation when one forgives another his guilt. The guilt, the fault must be erased — not accepted, or excused — and a new beginning made. To forgive ourselves is not to accept the evil but somehow to erase it and make a new beginning.

So how do we forgive ourselves when we are burdened with guilt, remorse, sorrow for what we have done, for what we are? My answer may be initially disappointing. It is this: we cannot do it. We cannot forgive ourselves. Somehow we need a redemptive love outside ourselves. God forgives and we are the instruments and recipients of His redemptive love when we forgive others, and also when we forgive ourselves. This I take to be the teaching of Paul when he tells us at the beginning of that magnificent eighth chapter of Romans: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh but after the spirit.” It is in Christ that we are freed from condemnation; it is in Christ that we are forgiven; it is in Christ that we see ourselves as we might be as children of God; and it is in Christ that we attain to the true selfhood, for it is through Christ we come to God, and it is in God that we live and move and have our being and find the self we really love and admire and seek.

Now how do we understand this? Paul’s explanation is clear. There are in man two natures, principles, two laws — that of the spirit and that of the flesh. It is Paul who gives us the image of the warfare between the spirit and the flesh in human nature. Spirit means life, breath, wind in the Greek. For Paul, of course, it refers to the life and reality of God, but in general it carries with it a sense of the divine. It connects with the Hebrew term for spirit which again refers to life and the power of the divine. It is this which is expressed in the early story of Saul being introduced to the mystical power of God. The guild of prophets he meets practice the ancient art of seeking the presence of the divine in themselves. They represent a kind of ecstatic, rhapsodic expression of the spirit, akin to those who spoke in tongues in New Testament times or later examples of the charismatic movement. The important teaching in the scripture lesson from Samuel is that Saul became a different person through the power of the spirit. And the saying, “Is Saul also among the prophets?”, called attention to the fact that Saul, so unlike what one might have expected from his earlier life, now stands out as one transformed by God. So the spirit is the transforming power of God.

The term flesh, *sarx* (sarcophagous), Paul used in at least three different ways: first, quite literally as referring to the body as when he refers to the thorn in his flesh; secondly, as referring to the human point of view as when he says Jesus was according to the flesh descended from David. But the most important sense in which he uses the term is to refer to man’s lower nature, a carnal, physical center of appetites and desires which seeks to represent the self as over against the spirit. The flesh is carnal mind which is enmity toward God. It is this which is to blame when we complain, as did Paul, that the good we would do, we do not; but the evil which we would not, that we do. And then he asks, who is to deliver us from this moral dilemma? We all know

this is the moral problem: it is not that we don't know what is right and wrong; we don't do the right and so often we do what we know is wrong. And the answer, of course, is the spirit of God through the love of Christ. The problem, as he says, is that knowing what is wrong is not enough to keep us from doing it. This was the weakness of the law— what is needed is a motivating force to do the good - a dynamic - and this is the love of Christ.

Now, again, how do we understand these ideas of Paul? We are clearly selves in the flesh in all the senses of Paul's use of the term. But we are also at the same time in some sense something more. The lower nature of man reveals at the same time a higher nature because it is this which is dissatisfied with the self ruled by the lower nature. One is on the way to a higher nature when one is unhappy with the lower one and wonders what to do to change it.

This is the fundamental significance of the Christian doctrine of the sinfulness of man so sharply stressed in the early Calvinist tradition of Baptists and Presbyterians, and so widely ignored in most popular preaching today. (An interesting fact — when I was in the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church for our joint Thanksgiving service, I noticed a fire extinguisher in the pulpit. It is there, I am sure, because of some possible emergency situation with candles, not fire and brimstone sermons.)

There is a positive meaning to the doctrine of the sinfulness of man, and that is this: to recognize that one is guilty and sinful, there must be an element of the self that stands outside that sin and guilt to recognize it as such. The doctrine of sin means not so much that man is so low, but that his destiny and promise are so high. It thus reveals the dual nature of man, the higher and lower natures represented by the spirit and the flesh in Paul.

Sin is like ignorance. To recognize it you must somehow be outside it. To know that you are ignorant is to have a knowledge that is outside that ignorance. Socrates long ago said that the Delphic oracle was right in calling him the wisest man in Greece because he was the only man who knew he didn't know anything while others pretended to a knowledge they did not have.

This was Socrates' whimsical way of showing his sense of a divine mission to stimulate men into examining their beliefs to see that an unexamined life is not worth living. But the point is, it takes knowledge to recognize one's ignorance — and that knowledge is outside the ignorance. This is why the truly ignorant think they know the answers, and the truly knowledgeable are so aware of their ignorance — not because their knowledge is so meager, but because their sense of knowledge and truth is so vast and high.

And this is the way it is with sin. The real sinner is the one who sees nothing wrong in himself, who feels he's all right just the way he is. As the Proverbs puts it, "Such is the way of an adulterous woman, she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith I have done no wickedness." The real sinner counts options, not principles. But the really good person on the other hand, like the wise man, is terribly sensitive to his failures and short-

comings — not that his life is so low or loathsome, but rather that his aspirations and moral vision are so lofty and demanding.

And where does this higher vision come from? This is the voice of the spirit in man, the voice of God spoken through the words -but more, the example of Jesus Christ, His Son. It is this that promises liberation from the law of the flesh; it is this that enables us to recognize the flesh for what it is — an instrument to express the purpose and will of God — for Christ gives us the motivation, the power to become children of God.

Now we can see how we can learn to get along with ourselves, how we can forgive us that self that is so painful to us. We must recognize that higher self, that portion of the spirit of God, as our true self. It is this which sees the lower self in rebellion and is dissatisfied. The answer is not to give up and assent to the weaknesses of the flesh — this is no way to feel good about yourself. Nor is it to stand in abject self-condemnation about how utterly worthless and reprehensible one is. The answer is to remember that God through Christ always is standing at the door of our lives and knocks — the inner dissatisfaction we feel, the regrets, remorse, faint hopes for something better are all indications of that Presence. When we open our hearts to it, when we really believe in ourselves as new creatures in Christ, then, and I think only then, can we truly see ourselves as we are as children of God and accept ourselves, yes, with all of our failures, but much more, with all of the promise, all of the beauty and power and glory that is our destiny in reflecting the creative love of God in Christ.