

THE MORAL IMMORALITY OF MAN

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Text: Romans 7:19. "For the good that I would do I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do."

I have often thought that if there were some kind of reasoning inhabitants upon the planet Mars who could observe our actions here on earth, they would find our behavior exceedingly strange; the paradoxes of our behavior would surely baffle the wisest of them, even as the wisest of our philosophers are baffled at the complex and contrasting elements in man's nature. Let us consider for a moment some of the strange things a Martian might see if he trained an all-seeing telescope eye on those creatures called men who make their lives so complicated. He would see men working toward good and great ideals on one hand, and destroying them on the other.

First of all he could not help but see how these little creatures swarm over each other in the deadly conflict of war. He might conclude from this that men are completely savage, and hold all life cheap, even that of their comrades-but if he looks farther he sees other men laboring to save the wounded, even the wounded of those they have been fighting to destroy; he sees men laboring to save life and others working to destroy it. But this is just one example of the dual nature of man; this is just one example of the way men work for opposite values. Consider how we work to plant trees and conserve soil, and at the same time others cut as many trees as they can and wear out the soil by bad farming. We build a democracy in which all men are given equal opportunities; we work for the freedom of all men and then develop Jim Crow rules and poll tax laws. We work to rid our cities of slums and give every man a decent standard of living, and at the same time concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. We strive in our medical sciences to increase the life span of man; our sciences develop new discoveries to make the life of man safer and more comfortable, and at the same time our improvements kill more and more people as we find we can't handle new improvements as speedy automobiles safely. We build schools to develop an educated and responsible citizenry and then willingly and knowingly let second-rate ward-healers control the politics of our local communities. We work to help those suffering from starvation and continue exploitation.

This sort of picture would be baffling to a Martian; he might properly wonder just what we are after in life with all these opposing aims. And if we examine the life of just a single individual we find the same sort of opposing forces at work, which impel him to do much that is good and helpful in the world both for himself and his fellowmen, and at the same time drive him to actions which destroy what his better self has been working to build. It is this double nature of man, this coupling of forces which point in opposite directions which has led men to develop a dualistic explanation of the universe, which has made him believe that there are evil forces in the world battling with the good for the control of the human soul. A classic illustration of this view is seen in the ancient legend of Dr. Faustus who fell under the control of the powers of evil, Mephisto or Satan. Faust becoming discouraged with his slow progress toward knowledge and happiness sells his soul to Satan, who promises him all of the pleasures and joys of the world if he would serve him. It is the same temptation which our Lord faced in the wilderness and turned

down, but Faust did not have the inner strength to resist the temptation. And so he sells his soul to the powers of evil. This is the story as we usually understand it, but it isn't the complete account. For there remains in Faust an inner impulse for good; he is not forsaken by God who still draws his allegiance, and finally with the aid of this redemptive power, Faust throws off the shackles of sin which Mephisto has thrown about him and becomes free. In this great story the eternal struggle of man to throw off the powers of evil and follow the laws of God is vividly portrayed. I do not think that there are powers of evil as opposed to God; I do not think that our destinies are shaped by the results of a conflict between some Satan and God. There is only one God; and we should not invent a Satan to blame for the things we do ourselves.

However we explain the source of these opposing instincts in man, the fact remains that they are in us, and in our daily lives we must constantly struggle for the supremacy of the good instincts. In all that we do we must make decisions and choices between the good and evil instincts. We are like the little boy with two apples, one big and one tiny, who must decide which to give to his friend. It would make him feel good in his heart to be generous and let the friend have the big one, but it would make him feel better in his stomach perhaps to keep the big one for himself. In such a way we struggle between our generous and noble impulses to help others and our selfish interest to help ourselves. There is no doubt that our most basic instincts are related to the interest of taking care of ourselves; the law of self preservation is the law of life. And yet according to one school of psychology at least, the instinct toward altruism, caring for the well-being of others is numbered among the few basic drives or impulses in man. Thus we see everywhere in nature the working of the unwritten law that we save our own skins first, and yet we see examples of self-sacrifice defying this law. Even in the animal kingdom we see such things as animals sacrificing their lives for their young—ants guarding an anthill against enemies with their lives instead of saving themselves, etc.

It is this conflict between generous and selfish impulses in man which gives rise to the condition which I call the moral immorality of man. There is none of us who can measure up at all times to complete loyalty to our nobler instincts; thus we remain essentially immoral as judged from the absolute standard of God. But almost none of us is without response at times to the nobler instincts that draw us, and so our immorality has a moral character. The distinction between good and bad is hard to draw sharply as between black and white, for so many of our noble actions may have selfish motivations in part, and so many of our self seeking pursuits may contain altruistic impulses. Just as white light can be broken down in a spectrum to show colors of indigo which are pretty black, so even the noblest of us are not free from baser motivations at times. Basically the only things we can call intrinsically good or bad from a moral point of view are good-will and ill-will, and these two impulses mix pretty thoroughly in much of our living. This business of leading a good life is not so simple as we would like to believe at times, because of this conflicting nature of man. It is not solved by following a few commandments, because these do not cover the multitude of choices we must make, and do not give us the power to keep our conflicting impulses in control. Thus we lead our lives of moral immorality and seem powerless to improve them. There is none of us who would deny that each man has a right to live at a decent standard, and we sincerely try to better the lot of our fellows, but at the same time we try to gain as much for ourselves as possible and thereby deny the poor man his share. We sincerely feel a sympathy for the underdog and desire to help him, but at the same time we view our minority

groups with suspicion and develop social castes. We feel a concern for the animal world also; there are few men who do not feel angry when they see someone beating a horse cruelly or kicking a dog, and yet the same man who objects to this may thoroughly enjoy hunting other creatures and killing them.

We work to establish a standard of morality in sexual relations, and yet are so far from reaching the ideal that many of our social evils are traced to moral laxity. We want a high degree of morality and yet want to destroy it for our own desires. A curious illustration of the double interest we have in this respect is that the most libertine of men who would be likely to define virtue as lack of opportunity are most insistent that they marry someone who is pure. And so it goes—a constant struggle in man between base and noble desires. Man works untiringly to build better social institutions, to improve his world, and at the same time destroys what he has built with the help of God. And so the record of man's social achievements stands as one of those great redwood trees in California whose trunk has been growing since the days of our Lord and reaches its limbs high into the sky proudly—while at its base a saw is eating through its foundations. No wonder that we become discouraged at the progress of man, and wonder how we can escape these evil forces within us which destroy which we seek to build.

This conflict between good and evil in man, this problem of the moral immorality of man is the very problem Paul was struggling with when he wrote that seventh chapter of Romans which was read in the scripture lesson. Paul is concerned with the problem of man's immorality, and seeks to explain it. And he does so by resorting to a kind of dualism which he takes over from the Greek thought. Man is a son of God and is thus impelled to live a life acceptable unto God but at the same time he is a child of the flesh, a mortal man and subject to fleshly desires. The Greeks explained evil as coming from the flesh; the only way to overcome it therefore was to deny the desires of the flesh. Paul takes over this idea. Thus he speaks of men as being slaves to the flesh, to physical desires. Paul was trained as a Pharisaic Jew and thus felt it necessary to explain why the law was powerless to help man out of his evil situation. And according to Paul the law could not help man conquer these evil impulses because it merely laid down commandments and prohibitions without providing a power for man which would enable him to lead the good life. Further, Paul saw in the law an evil influence which he associated with the flesh. When he says that he would not know sin unless it were for the law, he points out that the law by enumerating sins without showing how they could be overcome does more harm than good, by making people so aware of sin. It is like describing sins to a child in such a vivid manner that he goes out to see what it is like. The law could only point out, therefore, how sinful man is, without showing him what he could do about it. Paul was aware also, as Jesus was, that merely following the commandments of the law does not guarantee that a man is good. When Jesus complains that the Pharisees strain at gnats and swallow camels, he is pointing to this fact. The Pharisees were supposed to be so pure that they couldn't swallow any impurity such as a little gnat in their drinking water, so they carefully strained out all such things. And yet, they gulped down camels figuratively speaking, in the evil things which they did. One could still follow the law and be ruled by ill will towards his fellows. I often think of this when someone boasts that he is a good man because he follows the ten commandments. According to Jesus and Paul we have traveled a long way since then. We have a higher law to follow.

Thus the law is powerless to help man from his bondage to sin. Man knows what he should do but he has not the power to overcome the evil impulses which would prevent his doing what he should do, just as today we know how we should act, and at times do act in a noble manner, but cannot often overcome these selfish desires which interfere with our noble impulses. Thus Paul complains as we do today when we think seriously of our moral actions: "The good that I would do, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do." Paul goes on to explain that when he wants to do good he finds evil and sin present within him which prevent his doing that which he knows he should do. Thus as he feels the impulse to lead the life of God being stifled by other impulses of evil, he cries out: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Thus we find in Paul the same problem which we find today in our lives - the problem of the moral immorality of man.

There is this difference, however-Paul's religious experience gave him the solution to the problem. For he found in the vision of the stoning death of Jesus a power which enabled him to conquer over the baser impulses. Whatever his experience on the Damascus road was exactly, this much we know: he came away from this experience with a new power in his life which made him say that he lived in Christ and Christ in him, and that with this power he was dead to sin and risen in Christ so that he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him. He found a new law, a higher law, the life of the Spirit which gave him the power to lead the good life, and destroy the hateful paradox of man's moral immorality.

But how did this power come into Paul's life exactly? And how can we acquire it today? We might ask, what does Paul mean by being saved and living in Christ? How does the death of Jesus affect us today? These are the questions which have occupied the theologians for centuries and various explanations in the form of theories of the Atonement have been offered us. But if your experience is like mine, these theories have very little meaning in relation to our lives today. When I listen to these theories I am reminded of the woman who always won first prize at the county fairs for her mincemeat, and when asked how she made it, always told the ingredients (a little of this and a little of that), but never explained exactly how they were put together. So it is when we consider the theologians ideas of the Atonement; there is a secret which is not told which keeps us from knowing the full story. And the reason for this is, I think, that we must understand this much as Paul did-through experience. I do not mean that we must have a mystical experience such as Paul's on the road to Damascus. But we must experience the significance of Jesus' death by thinking of it in terms comprehensible to us, in ways that strike a responsive chord in our own hearts. I believe we can do this more easily by meditating upon the life and death of Jesus as they are recorded than by studying theology. As we call up in our minds that scene on Calvary where Jesus suffered and died through the sins of men, when we think of what he was and see him hanging on the cross, surrounded by jeering throngs sneering "He saved others; himself he cannot save", when we think of this picture in its deeper implications, we as spectators in this drama must inevitably give our assent to one side or the other. With our sympathies and our wills we align ourselves either with the sneering crowd or the man who is being crucified. And if we pledge our loyalties to the one who suffers alone, and think of what such a loyalty means; if we realize the self-sacrifice and the suffering which may be our lot, but still want to live for what he stood for, we begin to feel the power of Christ in our lives. We see that to do the will of the Father even though it means toil and trouble is possible

because of a power which comes into our lives when we follow his will. This choice cannot be hastily made; if we are to feel the power of the life of Jesus, we must thoroughly understand the implications of such a life, and follow its example because although we have our eyes open to the difficulty of such a life, the love of Christ constrains us to follow him.

This in simple outline is how I think this mysterious process called salvation works, how man is freed from the paradox of his moral immorality and is empowered to do the things he would do, and avoid those things he knows are wrong. It is an unceasing process, salvation, not done for us by Jesus once and for all on the Cross so we have nothing to do about it. Nor is it done by hitting a sawdust trail in an orgy of emotionalism. It means daily living the life of Christ, daily conquering those evil impulses which would destroy what we try to build. It means to do this not because of any future reward, but because this is the life one wants to lead as a son of God. We cannot expect perfection; even Paul confessed that he was far from attaining the state he wished for. But if we constantly keep in mind this powerful ideal, we will find that the voices of discord in our hearts are flooded out by this power from Christ. That is why I think it so important to meditate frequently upon the life and death of Jesus, as a spiritual, devotional exercise, for as we do so we gain increasing support and power to lead the kind of life we would lead and destroy the hold that our immoral impulses have over us. As we do so, we face life with the attitude of the amateur painter, who after viewing the work of a great master, said: "Now I shall begin all over again." And as we do so, we will find that a life dedicated to doing the will of God by serving man, is truly the life more abundant, a life of [] And we will find as did Paul that the gospel of Christ is indeed "the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth."