

Practicing Christianity

by Ray C. Stedman

The question we are facing in the present series, centering on Paul's letter to the Ephesians in Chapter 4, is, "How to live a Christian life in the midst of a confused world."

That was the problem in the 1st century and that is the problem in the 20th century. It is the same kind of a world, demanding the same kind of a life. Perhaps we could put it very well in the words of the title of one of Dr. Tournier's books, *A Whole Person In A Broken World*. That is a very expressive way of facing the question that is before us in this present series.

Now the answer of the world itself to that question is, basically, "Express yourself," i.e., live for yourself, take all you can while you can, get it all now. You only need look at the deteriorating fabric of life in our day to see the inadequacy of that solution, and the darkness and poverty of that approach.

The answer of religion in general (and I include faiths besides Christianity) and even oftentimes the church itself is: "Try your best to do what is right." Much of the preaching that will go forth from pulpits across this country can be reduced to this one phrase, "do your best," try your best, try harder. This sounds very good but it never works, because the self that tries is the very self that is causing the problem. That is why those who attempt to solve the pressures and demands of life on this basis inevitably find themselves caught up in a vicious circle of despair, in which they find they are not able to do what they thought they were able to do. They set out to do it but find themselves unable to accomplish it and gradually drift into despair.

Now the answer of the Scriptures is a wholly different thing. We never have begun to understand Christianity unless we see this. The Christian message is not a way of saying, "try better, try harder, do your best to live a good life." If anyone thinks

that, he has misunderstood the whole point of Christianity. The answer of Christianity is a personal experience of a living Lord, to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as a Person; to enter into a personal relationship with him, and to learn to let him live his life through you.

Now that is a completely different principle, but that is exactly what he offers to do, to live his life again in you.

I know, to many, this is difficult to grasp. To them, it seems that this is advocating a kind of supine passivity. Christians are exhorted to sit and wait, to put their minds in neutral and wait for God to do something. Christians, in their earnestness to set this teaching forth, have often given that impression, that it is simply to "let go and let God," "a he'll do everything, and you don't have to do anything" kind of thing. Of course, it is true that we must face the clear statement of Scripture that, "we, in ourselves, can do nothing," {cf, John 15:5}. We do not add to God's working, but that does not mean that we do not have a part in it. This is not a mystic neutrality where we simply are waiting for God to do everything. As Paul makes clear in the passage we are looking at, especially in Verses 22-24, the great principle by which the Christian life is lived involves the will, a continual exercise of the human will. "Put off the old, and put on the new," he says, that is the process. That is, reject the appeal from the old life and act instead on the wonderful possibilities of the new life in Jesus Christ.

This is something that must go on repeatedly. That is why the Christian life is called a walk, because it is two steps repeated again and again.

How do you walk? Well, you put one leg ahead of the other. That is one step but that is not a walk. Then what? Then you put the other leg ahead of that one. You have now utilized both the parts of your body designed for walking. You have

taken two steps. Then what? Well, you start all over again. You take the first step again and then the other one.

Thus it is described as a process of putting off (that is one step) and putting on (that is the other). And the whole life is to be lived by the continual exercise of this principle. That is a walk, and that is why the word comes to us, "Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh," {cf, Gal 5:16}.

Now this works right out into life. Christian faith is not designed merely to get us involved in religious activity. There is nothing God dislikes more than religion. He is interested in life. True, life has religious aspects and then it is all right, but religion alone is an empty and distasteful thing to God. He says so repeatedly, both in the Old and the New Testaments. But he is interested in seeing true principles being applied to the situations where you live, and, when they are, they create an obvious change of behavior in your life.

Now, in Chapter 4, beginning with Verse 25, the apostle applies the principle of "putting off and putting on" to specific areas of living.

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. {Eph 4:25-29}

See how practical this is, how specific, how it encourages us to let our faith come into focus in our deeds. This is always God's intention.

Now, before we look at these more closely, there are three things that press to be said:

1. First, this kind of living is not possible unless you are a Christian, unless you have been born again, regenerated, you have passed from death unto life, from darkness into light. These words of Paul are not addressed to men in general. Oftentimes, much misunderstanding of

Christian faith comes from the fact that people read their Bibles who are not yet Christians themselves, and they read passages such as this and think it means this is addressed to them, that they are to do these things. Now, the fact is, the Word of God recognizes clearly that no one who is not yet a Christian can live like this. It may seem to them they can, and this is the deceitfulness of the natural heart. It will suggest you can do this, and live on this level, but if you try it you will discover that you only can do so in very limited aspects, and that even in those areas there is an incomplete demonstration of these things. The inner life, the hidden life, remains unchanged, it is only the outer life that changes.

In each one of these exhortations the great principle that Paul has outlined is manifest. In each there is a putting off, and a putting on. Now the non-Christian cannot put off his old life because it is not an old life to him, it is his present life, it is his only life, it is all he has. That is why every appeal to a non-Christian to put off the things that arise out of the old life is to demand an impossibility. Jesus said, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adultery, etc." {cf, Matt 15:19 KJV}. How can you put it off if that is part of your life? You see how impossible it is?

Also, of course, if the non-Christian has no old life to put off, he has no new life to put on. The new life is Christ. If we do not have Christ we do not have a new life, therefore the appeal to a man to live on this basis is absurd if he has not yet begun with Jesus Christ. I wish to make that unmistakably clear. If you are here and you have never had the experience of having Jesus Christ enter your life and giving you his life, that is the place to begin. Then these exhortations will fit into place, but without that there can be no fulfilling.

2. Now, the second thing is that even the Christian, to whom this is addressed, must understand that he is not actually putting his old self to death when he denies the urges that come from it, for that has already been done in the cross. Certain Christians have the idea we are to go about crucifying ourselves, putting the old self to death. They think we must personally do this and it is a very painful process.

They are constantly concerned about it, and it shows on their faces in anxiety and tension and morbidity. But the Christian is not told to put the old man to death, he is told that it is done in the cross. What we are doing here is claiming, in personal experience, what God has already done in the reality of the cross and the resurrection.

Now this is very important. Someone has well put it,

“All progress in the spiritual life comes from the simple apprehension of a fact already true in God’s plan and purpose. It is not something you have to make true, it is believing something God has already said is true, the apprehension of what has already been done in Christ. Not something to be done when we ask it, but faith laying hold of what already is, in Christ.”

That is helpful. It means that this process of putting off and putting on is based upon the reality of what Christ did for us in the cross and the resurrection. We simply make it ours in experience, but it has been done already.

3. Now a third thing, and this is very important, a mental understanding of this process of putting off and putting on, this doctrine of “walking in the Spirit” is not enough – it requires the actual practice of this. Here again many Christians go astray. They learn these truths, they grasp with their minds the wonderful deliverance God has come to give, they see there is something to this in the lives of others around them, and because they understand the doctrine they think they have the experience. Unfortunately, many Christians learn the language of the spiritual life, but their lives manifest that they do not know what it really means to live on this basis. But it is not knowledge that does the trick, it is practice. Truth known does not help anyone, it is truth done which delivers. Truth known puffs you up with pride, as Paul points out to the Corinthians {see 1 Cor 8:1}, but truth done, Ah, that is a different thing. The fact that you can go away, and say, “I understand now, I know now how this is done, I know how this works,” does not mean that you are experiencing it. These things must be put into prac-

lice. Put off, and put on – these must come right out at the level of life.

Now let us look more closely at these examples he gives, for, in doing so, we will not only understand how this general principle applies in life, but we will understand the principle itself more clearly. Putting off the old life, the one we had in Adam, and putting on the new life in terms of actual experience, is not a vague, mystic thing. It is not some kind of mental gymnastics. It is not something you think of for a moment and then relax and everything takes care of itself. It is not a pat formula. It is done in terms of whatever temptation faces you at any given moment. That is what Paul makes clear here.

The apostle begins with what is probably the most universal temptation in human experience, the temptation to lie, the misrepresent or exaggerate the truth.

Now why does he start there? Because that is the most evident characteristic of the old life – lying.

He has already said the old life is characterized by deceitful urges. These drives, these urges within us, are lying to us, they deceive us. Therefore, we find it easy to lie to others, to deceive others. Lying is the basic characteristic of the old life since it traces back to the devil. Jesus said, “He is a liar and a murderer from the beginning,” {cf, John 8:44}. All of us have discovered this without difficulty.

Did you go to school to learn how to lie? No, of course you didn’t. You came by it quite naturally. We have learned even as little children that though a lie is an abomination to the Lord, it is a very present help in time of trouble! At least that was our philosophy, that was what we thought.

But now as a Christian we are to put off the old man, the urge to lie. Put it off deliberately, definitely, purposefully – reject it. Why? Because it will get you into trouble? That is the reason the worldling does not lie. I am not suggesting that every worldling invariably lies and all Christians invariably tell the truth. Of course not. It is quite possible for worldlings to tell the truth. We all did before we were Christians. We had times when we told the truth, as well as times when we lied. But the issue is the motive behind it. Why does the worldling tell the truth? Why did we, before we were Christians, tell the truth? Largely because we

felt we would get in trouble if we did not. We were concerned lest the lie catch up with us. We lived in a society and on a level of relationship with others that demanded this. We found it was the thing to do, we were expected to do it, so for our own advantage we told the truth.

But the Christian is on a different basis. He is to stop lying not because to do so will get him into trouble, but he is not to lie because it is part of the old life which in the cross has been totally judged and rejected. It is true that it will get him into trouble. "If we sow to the flesh, we shall of the flesh reap corruption" {cf, Gal 6:8}, so there is no question about that. But the Christian is not to lie because that is what he has rejected, in Christ, that is what has been judged in the cross, that is part of the old life. Though it makes its subtle appeal to the heart as it did of old, suggesting that if we tell a lie we will get out of this difficulty, or get this blessing, or obtain that desired end, yet the Christian knows that is all a lie, that it will not do that, will not produce the end that is desired. He sees it in the light of the cross. This is why the Christian is expected to put away these things, and then to put on the new man, i.e., put on Christ.

Now how do you do that? Well, Paul says, "Let every one speak the truth with his neighbor." That is putting on Christ. You see how practical that is? If you reject lying, and, instead, you deliberately, intentionally, purposefully speak the truth, even though it may hurt, even though it is sometimes hard truth, then you are "putting on Christ" when you speak the truth. That is walking in the Spirit, in practice. There is nothing mystical about it at all. It is exceedingly practical. You reject lies, you do not speak falsehood, but you speak the truth for Christ's sake, because he is the truth. When you do, you are putting on Christ. That is what walking in the Spirit means.

Now he adds a special reason for doing this. "Because," he says "we are members one of another." That means that, in the body of Christ, as members of Christ's life, we do not live to ourselves. Therefore, if we lie, we not only hurt ourselves, but we hurt others as well. Obviously, here, he means other Christians, because we are members one of another in the body of Christ. But this does not mean that it is fine to lie to worldlings, but not to Christians. He is not saying here, "Stop lying to Christians, but with someone who is not a Christian, go right ahead, that's all right." No, he

is saying, "If you lie to anyone you hurt the whole body of Christ, not only yourself, but all who are Christians." The cause of Christ is injured by even one lie. Christianity is made contemptible in the eyes of the one to whom you lied. He not only sees you, but he sees the whole cause for which you stand, and he writes it off as worthless.

A man said to me the other day, "You know, when a man tells me that he's a Christian, I get nervous and cautious. I've been burned so many times by Christians, I've decided I can never trust a Christian." What brought him to that place? Christians who lied! When we lie we injure the cause of Christ. This is the point he is making.

Now he goes on. We are not only to put off falsehood, but to put on the truth. It is that positive side of speaking the truth in all aspects throughout life, consistently, which the worldling is unable to do, and many Christians follow this. It is not that they always lie. As I have suggested already, it is quite possible for a worldling or a Christian to refrain from lying, but then what? Does he go on to speak the truth, or does he say nothing? Does he resort to what the world calls "white lies"? They are called that because they are considered harmless. But, when you see this in the light of the Scriptures, you see that oftentimes a white lie, so-called, can be the most terribly cruel thing you can do to an individual.

What are white lies? Well, they usually occur in circumstances where we are asked to give our opinion about one's dress, or personality, and we feel negative about it but do not want to say anything for fear of hurting their feelings, so we lie, we say the nice thing, the pleasant thing, and their feelings are not hurt. We think, "I've saved them from hurt, therefore no harm was done in lying to them." But that is often the cruelest thing we could have done. As a result of this practice of lying to one another in these areas, there are many who go long years and never know the problems that are making them miserable. No one ever points these out to them, and they go on suffering needlessly because no one will tell them the truth.

It is like the halitosis ads in the paper. We have all seen certain advertisements. Some lovely girl is standing at the door with a frown on her face saying goodnight to her beloved. He is looking puzzled and she is looking angry and underneath it says, "Even your best friend won't tell you."

But that is not kindness, it is cruelty. Christians are exhorted to put off this kind of thing and to speak the truth.

It is an arresting thing to recall that the Lord Jesus not only commanded us to forgive one another, but also to rebuke one another. In Luke 17 the disciples came to the Lord with a question, and in answering, Jesus said, "If your brother offend you, rebuke him, and if he repent, forgive him," {cf, Luke 17:3}. We hear the "forgive," but we do not hear the "rebuke" – but one is as much a command as the other. "If your brother offend against you, rebuke him," tell him so. Of course it is not necessary to say something every time we feel annoyance, otherwise there would be no room for the exercise of Christian forbearance and long suffering. If we can put the annoyance away with a quick thought and dismiss it, fine, do that by all means. There is no need to be touchy. But if something causes continual annoyance, even though we try to forget it, but find we cannot, then say something. That is our Lord's command, "rebuke him, and if he repent, forgive him, and if seven times in the same day he turn to you and say 'I repent' then forgive him seven times," {cf, Luke 17:3b-4}.

Now, what kind of sin is that which requires forgiveness seven times in the same day? I heard Dr. Henry Brandt tell of an incident in his own ministry when a couple came to him with problems in their marriage relationship. It turned out that she was a door slammer. She had formed the habit in her childhood of slamming doors and every door she went through she slammed behind her. This was a continual grating on the nerves of her husband. For you it may be leaving the top off the toothpaste tube, or hanging nylons up in the bathroom. It can be anything. She happened to be a door slammer. He put up with it for a long time, gritting his teeth and feeling upset and annoyed every time she would slam a door, but he did not want to say anything about it, it seemed so trivial. Finally after Dr. Brandt pointed out to him that this was a continual annoyance, he did go to her and told her that this bothered him and asked that she would not do it. She was instantly repentant. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, "I really didn't realize that I was doing this, but now that you point it out I see what I have done. I do slam doors, and I'm sorry, I won't do it anymore." Then she got up and walked out of the room and bang went the door behind her.

She said, "I'm sorry." I do not know if that occurred seven times that day, but I would not be surprised if it did.

Thus we are to tell the truth to one another. These things that irk and annoy us are to be shared openly. Let us say they annoy us, and be quick to forgive when there is any sense of concern about it on the other's part. We are to speak the truth. The only way we can grow is if someone tells us the truth about ourselves. Truth is the sign of a new life. You can never get worldlings to live on this basis. They are so concerned lest they offend others or lest they be a problem to others that they will not come out and talk as openly as this. But in Christ we can learn to give and receive on this basis.

Now he moves to another practical matter, one of the most common problems of life, anger.

Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. {Eph 4:26-27 RSV}

That is no misprint. He did not leave out a negative here as many think. He did not say, "Be not angry." He said, as it reads here, "Be angry." That is arresting, is it not? Many people never read their Bibles that closely and do not see that this is what it says. Be angry! The capacity for anger is part of the image of God in man. God gets angry, and rightfully so. If a man cannot get angry there is something wrong with him. The man or woman who never gets angry is subhuman, is denying their essential humanity. Be angry, the apostle says, there are things that ought to make you angry, many things that ought to make you angry today – but do not sin. There is a sinful kind of anger. What is that? He does not tell us here, but we see it in other places.

Sinful anger, of course, is anger that is self-defensive, i.e., centered in the self. It is always wrong. Sinful anger is part of the old life, it is to be put off. If you are angry because your feelings have been hurt, or your pride has been injured, or you have been mistreated in some way, perhaps you have not been given the position of the place or the favor that you think you ought to have – this is sinful anger and is to be put off. It arises out of the old life, it is part of the life of Adam.

Well then, what is true anger? True anger is that which is concerned with others' wrongs. You can see it in Jesus:

- He was angry at the Pharisees when they opposed his healing of men on the Sabbath day. "He looked upon them with anger" {cf, Mark 3:5}, we read, "and was grieved in his heart" over their stubborn indifference to the needs of suffering humanity. It made him angry.
- He was angry when the disciples kept the children away from him. He spoke with anger. "Let them come unto me" {cf, Mark 10:14}, he said, and his brow was dark with anger because they were keeping away the ones for whom he came.
- He was angry at the cruelty of the devil when he was at the tomb of Lazarus. His heart was moved, and he spoke with bitter anger. He was angry at the devil for the destruction and the heartache and the heartbreak that sin brings into human life. He was longing to lay hold of it and do something about it.
- He was angry at the shameless greed of the money changers in the temple and he knotted a cord and drove them out of the temple. Believe me, he was angry. He was very angry because they were ignoring the purpose of the Father's house. They were teaching men wrong things in the name of God. They were carrying on destructive activities in the name of religion.

Yet we read that when he was reviled, when people said things against him personally, "he reviled not again," {1 Pet 2:23 KJV}. When he suffered he did not answer back but he committed himself to God who was able to handle all things. The apostle teaches us, "Avenge not yourself, but commit all vengeance to God," {cf, Rom 12:19}. Therefore, we are to put this off, this sinful, self-centered anger that arises from a deceitful urge.

Ah, yes, but go further still. Even when your anger is righteous (unrighteous anger is always wrong and should immediately be put away), but even when it is righteous anger, then "let not the sun go down upon your wrath." That is a common

parable out of the life of that time, and it simply means do not nurse your anger, do not hold a grudge, do not let the sun go down upon it, do not let it carry over to another day. Now do not take this in a crassly literal fashion. This does not give one license to get angry at nine o'clock in the morning and go about saying, "Well, I've got twelve hours left when I can enjoy this and be angry at someone until the sun goes down." It is simply a way of saying that when the first flush of righteous anger has passed then do not nurse it, do not perpetuate that anger. That was the explosion that was designed to set in motion the engine of your will, but it is not the fuel upon which it is to run. That is to be love and concern. Anger is needed at times to prod us into action, to get us moving along lines of proper concern. We hear of some gross injustice and we get angry, and rightly so. Do not condemn yourself because you get angry like that, but do not let it carry over, do not act out of anger. Act rather out of the love that has made you angry.

He adds another word of warning. If you do carry anger over, no matter what kind it may be, you give the devil an opportunity. An opportunity to do what? To create bitterness, to let that anger ferment until it turns to revenge or burning resentment. In Hebrews the writer warns us not to let any branch of bitterness spring up and trouble you. That is precisely the point. It troubles others, but primarily it troubles you. Others are sometimes unaware of your anger and your disturbance, but you – you cannot eat or sleep. You are all upset, you turn sour inside. The thing goes on day after day and your enemy, the one that made you feel this way, may be totally unaware of it, blissfully going on his way. But it is not troubling him, it is troubling you. Therefore, give the devil no opportunity, because he will move right in.

Put off the old, put on the new. You see how practical this is? We shall go right on from here to see how this applies to other areas of life. Remember that it is all the application of a basic principle – resist the old. Oh, you will feel it, you will feel the lure of it, the pull of it, the desire to give in, but resist it with your will. It is God's will that your will stand against that thing. And then turn to Christ. Cast yourself upon him. Say, "Lord, I feel like doing this but I know it is wrong, I don't want to do it. Lord, meet me with your strength and your grace and your love." Put on the new, and

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when you do you will discover there is an impartation of his life, his strength. He is love, he is your strength.

Do not sing,

I need thee, oh, I need thee,
every hour I need thee.

Sing,

I have thee,
every hour I have thee.

I have his life, I have his strength, I have his grace. That is the secret of living in a troubled world.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this practical look at life. Let us not escape its full implications in terms of our own experience. Show us how these matters touch us right where we live. Help us to see how we can be changed by this transforming secret that has taken place within us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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