

THE MAN GOD USES

by Ray C. Stedman

In discussing our subject the term, *man*, is used in a generic sense which includes women as well. Man or woman, there is no respect of persons with God. God delights to use anyone, boy or girl, man or woman, who makes himself available to him. I suspect that, if we investigated, we would find in most hearts here a basic hunger to be used of God. If you have been a Christian for any length of time you have experienced something of this and you know the joy of it, the glory of it, the sheer excitement of it. There is nothing quite like the sense of having been a channel of divine activity, of having been used to do God's work.

I suspect that there is a hunger in your heart to be used of God not merely occasionally, but consistently. And to be used, not despite yourself, as sometimes happens (for the Scripture tells us that God even uses the devil, so if you are resting upon that you are in pretty poor company), but to be used with full acquiescence and acceptance of God's program for you. Doubtless you desire to be used to heal, to make right, to restore, to break down middle walls of participation, to unite that which is shattered and fragmented, to deliver from oppressions, from bondage and enslavement, to enlighten and open eyes, to illuminate reality, to dispel mists, illusions and visions, and to empower, enrich, fulfill, and intensify. All these are descriptions of the work God is here to do, and what he will use you to do if you are available to him. It is exactly what God proposes to do with each one of us, and, thus, to be used is what gives meaning and purpose to life.

Without this, the best we can do results in a sense of deadness, meaninglessness, and pointlessness. We might give a most impressive display of energy, vitality, and activity, but when we get to the end we shall have to ask ourselves, "What's been the point of it all?" In the day of the judgment of the believer before God he may say to us, "What you did was interesting, and active, but you missed the point." Thus I suspect that with many of us there is a very deep desire to be used of God. I confess, for my own part, that I will be quite content if it could be written on my tombstone what I once saw on another's, "He was used of God."

Spiritual maturity, becoming grown up as a Christian, is nothing more nor less than to be made ready for consistent use by the Spirit of God. When you have reached that place it will be marked by certain signs, which are unconsciously revealed to us by the Apostle Paul in a well-known passage from the first chapter of Romans:

I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish: so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. {Rom 1:13-16 RSV}

It should be quite apparent that the apostle is not drawing a deliberate self-portrait. He does not intend to talk about himself or what kind of a man he is; he is simply breathing out to these Roman Christians, many of whom he has never met, a longstanding desire on his part to come to the capital of the empire to visit them and to have a ministry among them. But in the process of doing this he unconsciously reveals the qualities of the man or woman that God uses. This we will look at together.

You are familiar with the three common divisions of this text, the three "I am's" of verse 14, 15, and 16.

First, "I am under obligation [or as the Old Version puts it, "I am a debtor" both to Greeks and to barbarians." Here the apostle is breathing out his desire to be used to reach others. He is the man for others; he is under compulsion to travel incessantly to reach "both Greeks and barbarians" (or as we would put it in our modern

terminology, both the squares and the hippies), "the wise and the foolish " (the eggheads and the hopheads). It does not make any difference what branch of society you are considering, the apostle says, I have a sense of obligation to any of them. I am under compulsion to reach them and to help them and change them. You see the beating of his heart for other people.

What does this all mean? We read these verses quite wrongly at times. We tend to read them as though he had in view the needs of these Greeks, with their culture and their refinement, and also the barbarian world with its primitive conditions, its lack of understanding and education and, seeing the need deep in each heart, he is desiring to meet it out of compassion. We hear much these days of the humanistic appeal, the need to help people who are in trouble. But we read this quite wrongly if we read it thus. This was not what drew the apostle out to people. These words reveal something quite different. They reveal a man in whom the power of self has been broken. The principle by which we normally live our lives, that is, "What's in it for me?" is a question which had lost its meaning for the Apostle Paul. He was no longer asking himself, "What's in it for me?" He was no longer concerned about what he got out of life, but he was breathing out a hunger to be involved, to be poured out, for the life of someone else. He was essentially and primarily the man for others.

Selfishness grips your heart as it does mine. It is hard to break its grip. We find ourselves inevitably and instinctively relating everything to what it is going to do to us, and what we will get out of it. As one Christian honestly put it,

I lived for myself, for myself alone,
For myself and none beside,
Just as if Jesus had never lived
And as if he had never died.

Unfortunately that is descriptive of much Christian living. There you have it. That is life as we know it in these mid-20th century days. We live for ourselves -- what we want and hope to get.

But how different is the spirit of the apostle. He longs to risk his life, his health, and his fortune for the sake of others. He was most serious about it. You can see how seriously he took it in the eleventh chapter of Second Corinthians,

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the cities, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. {2 Cor 11:24-28 RSV}

That is describing a man in whom the power of self has been broken. He no longer cares what happens to him, he is ready to risk anything, hazard anything, in order that he might discharge his debt to barbarian and to Greek alike. It was not always so with this man. There was a time, he tells us, when he, too, lived for self-advantage. He counted up his resources to himself and found there were four things going for him:

1. First was his ancestry: In the eyes of God Paul felt that was a great advantage. He was born a Hebrew of the Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin. He had the right pedigree.
2. Then, too, there was his orthodoxy which he felt also gave him the right to claim the favor of God. He belonged to the strictest party of the Jews, the Pharisees, the fundamentalists. He was a member of the group that took the Word of God most seriously and interpreted it most literally. Notice that, in these things, he was not trying to find favor in the eyes of men, but in the eyes of God. Even before his conversion, Paul knew that no life is worth a snap of the finger if it is not somehow related to God. So these are the things he felt counted with God: his ancestry, his orthodoxy.
3. And then, his activity: He says he was a persecutor of the church. When this little cult of the

Nazarenes arose around the troublemaker from Galilee, named Jesus, and threatened the Hebrew faith and the teachings of Moses, Paul was not merely content to tut-tut about it and wring his hands. He organized a band of patriots and moved out with soldiers to stamp them out. He was active in the persecution of the church, and he thought, in all good conscience, that God would be pleased with that kind of activity.

4. Finally, he took pride in his morality. He was blameless, he says, before the Law. Whenever the Law condemned him, he faced up to it, and brought a sacrifice, and thus cleared up his conscience. He tried to walk upright and just before the Law, and he had a clear conscience in that respect. He thought these things ought to have brought God right over to his side.

But, he tells us, there came a night in the city of Damascus when they let him down over the wall in a basket. For the rest of his life he looked back to that event as the time when God began to teach him the most important lesson in his life. He had marshalled all his resources, all his human abilities, all the brilliance of his mind and the power of his educated intellect, to the task of reaching the Jews in Damascus for Christ, and that night it all came crashing down around his feet. He found himself hunted and hounded like a criminal, driven out of the city, and finally let over the wall in a basket. What a grinding humiliation for a man of proud spirit, as was this man! He went up to Jerusalem, and the disciples there wouldn't have anything to do with him. He went into the temple and the Lord ordered him out of Jerusalem and told him to leave immediately. He then did the hardest thing on earth to do; he went down to his home town and lived there in humility and obscurity for about five years. No one heard anything about the mighty Apostle Paul. "Whatever happened to Paul?" people were asking. "He was converted in such a dramatic way on the Damascus road, and we thought something great would come of it, but who's heard of Paul lately?"

But Paul was learning what he expresses in Philippians 3. There he says, "I learned that the four things which I thought would greatly impress God were useless. They were nothing but garbage, pure dung, manure! I learned to count them as refuse, and to realize that in Jesus Christ I had everything I needed. If I would quit trying to live for myself, but give myself to him, to accomplish his goals, all that he is would be made available to me, and I could have everything I needed for whatever he wanted done," {cf, Phil 3:7-11}. That is the secret he learned, and that is what finally broke the grip of selfish concern in his life and turned him into "the man for others." He tells us himself how it works. "The love of Christ," he says, "constrains me," {cf, 2 Cor 5:14}. It drives me out, it constrains.

Now you see why I say we read these verses wrongly? It was not the need of the Greeks and the barbarians that drew him out. I confess, knowing my own heart, that I could read the most heart-rending stories of need in human lives and remain calloused and unmoved. Such is the selfishness of the human heart, and you well know this is true. You too can be exposed to terrible need, and, if it makes too much demand upon you, your temptation is to turn and look the other way, to pretend it isn't there, instead of responding. Well then, what is the answer? It is not the presentation of horrible need, the hideous suffering of humanity, that will move us to act, but we must find, as this man did, that the power of self can be broken only as we see the hunger of the heart of Jesus Christ. The love he awakens in us for him creates a desire to satisfy his hunger to have all men brought to him, Greek and barbarian alike. It is what he wants, that makes the difference. But one thing melts the hardness and selfishness of our hearts, and that is love for Jesus Christ.

I agree with John R. W. Stott who, at the Pastors' Conference at Mt. Hermon this past January, pointed out that the primary motive for evangelism is not the need of men, but a spirit of jealousy for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, a hunger that he might have all that is rightfully his. That is what jealousy is, an intolerance of rivals.

There is a wrong jealousy based upon a wrong relationship. We have no right to be jealous of those with whom we do not have a proper relationship. But if a wife and husband give themselves to one another they have established a relationship. If a rival intrudes into that, the wife or husband has a right to be jealous because the other one has already given himself. It is that kind of jealousy Paul is speaking of when he says he is jealous for Christ. He says he desires that Christ might have that which belongs to him, which is his by right of sacrifice.

As he sees the face of Jesus Christ and the hunger of his heart to have from every tribe and nation, men and women, to belong to him, this great apostle says, "I don't care how dirty they are, how filthy they may be, how proud or arrogant they may be in their intellectual conceit, I want to reach them for Christ's sake, that he might be satisfied and have that which belongs to him."

It is not the message of the hymn, *Will there be any stars in my crown?* I hate that hymn. It is so pettishly selfish. Or that other hymn which I must confess I don't like either, though it is a favorite of many, *O That Will Be Glory For Me*. Who cares about glory for you or for me? No, there is another hymn I think is much more appropriate.

Must I go, and empty handed
Must I meet my Savior so?
Not one soul with which to greet him,
Must I empty handed go?

Must I appear before him with nothing to show for what he has been to me, what he is through me; no word of witness, no changed lives, no transformed attitudes on the part of others because of what I have been, by his grace? Must I go and empty handed be? That is the primary thrust to evangelism. Will he have the full glory due to his name? That is what ought to constrain Christians. Here is a man who is constrained by the love of Christ. His heart is captured, his emotions are moved. That is an essential quality in the man or woman that God consistently uses, a constrained heart.

Look at the next quality.

so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. {Rom 1:15 RSV}

"Not only are my emotions moved by love for the Lord Jesus," says Paul, "but my will is engaged as well. I am not only drawn, I am ready to act." I love this, because it emphasizes a time to stop talking and start doing.

I read years ago of D. L. Moody who said to a man on one occasion, "Why don't you try doing so-and-so?" The man replied, "I've been aiming to do that for a long time." In his blunt way, Moody replied, "Well, brother, it's about time you quit aiming and started firing."

It is not enough to talk, to think, or to dream. There must come moments of action. That is what Paul says. I'm ready to go, I'm eager to preach to you. It is action that turns belief into faith. You haven't exercised faith if you have simply believed the truth. You have exercised faith only when you have acted on the truth you have believed.

In Hebrews 11 we read, "Noah believed God and built an ark, to the saving of his household by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith," {cf, Heb 11:7}. That is faith. Noah believed and acted. Abraham was called and obeyed. It is not enough to have wonderful desires and wonderful dreams of being used of God -- act on them.

- Some of you have been talking a long time about inviting a friend to one of the outreach meetings this summer. Don't wait any longer, act!
- Some of you young people have been thinking about inviting a friend to the coffee house. Well, don't wait, act!
- Invite a lonely person to dinner. Move out!

Manifest an eagerness, an ardency of spirit to fulfill what God lays upon your heart. That is the quality of faith, and without faith it is impossible to please God.

Faith, mighty faith the promise sees
And looks to God alone:

Laughs at impossibilities
And cries, "It shall be done."

That is the second quality of the man God uses: Commitment. Paul here is committed to act. He not only is constrained. but he is committed.

Finally, the third thing, he is not ashamed of the gospel: He has reached the intelligent conclusion that the gospel has no rivals, that it can do what nothing else can do and therefore there is no need to be ashamed because it is pure, undiluted, undiminished power! And not merely power, but God's power, resurrection power, a unique kind of power which nothing in the world can rival. There is nothing like it anywhere. To me, this is the missing note above all else which we lack in our present life in the world today. Christians have forgotten that the gospel is absolutely unique. It does not borrow anything from any human source: It does not borrow from psychology, from history, from philosophy, from science, or from anything. It is an absolutely unique force. If Christians are not declaring this, there is no other body in the world capable of proclaiming it. That is why Paul says, I am not ashamed of it.

If anything could make him ashamed it would be the city of Rome. Rome sneered at the Christian story. These proud Roman citizens laughed at this fantastic tale of a man named Jesus who lived in an obscure Roman province, and who was supposedly raised from the dead after the procurator Pontius Pilate had put him to death. It was absurd to these practical, hard-headed Romans. Rome ruled in haughty power as mistress of the earth. Rome was proud of its roads which ran throughout the whole empire and made trade and commerce possible everywhere. Rome was proud of its culture, with its beautiful cities and its wonderful statues and art and music. Rome was proud of its conquests, of the fact that its armies were unbeatable. For over 1,000 years a kind of uneasy peace lay over the world called *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, because of the power and might of Rome's invincible armies.

But, with all this display of power, there were a lot of things Rome could not do. Rome was powerless when it came to freeing the slaves that abounded in the Empire. Half of the Roman Empire were slaves, and Rome could do nothing about that. Romans were seemingly powerless to curb their own lusts. At the close of this very chapter of Romans there is a terrible description of what their lusts led them to do. The seeds of disintegration were already manifest in Roman society, which would ultimately bring the whole thing crashing down around their ears. Romans were absolutely helpless when it came to vanquishing their fears. They lived in terror,

- Terror of the barbarian hordes that were around the borders of the empire,
- Terror of death, and of nature.

They were constantly engrossed in rank superstition because of their fears. They were powerless to cure or heal the inner agonies of their spirit. You only need to read the literature of that day to know their poignant cry for help against the meaninglessness of life. They were unable to awaken hope, and on tombstone after tombstone you find written in Latin, *No Hope*.

But all these needs the gospel meets. That is the uniqueness of it. Here is our world today, like Rome, powerless amid its display of power. It can do so many things of a technological nature, but one thing it cannot do: It cannot heal a human heart, it cannot awaken hope, and it cannot unite that which is fragmented and divided. It has no power in this realm. But when you have been used as an instrument of that kind of power, beside that the exercise of earthly power is dull and drab indeed.

Dr. Howard Hendricks from Dallas has been with us here for a few days. He was telling me about his visit to Campus Crusades Headquarters. He met there certain Christian young men who were wrestlers. They had joined a special athletic team that Campus Crusades was sending out in witness around the country. These men were top wrestlers and had been engaged in five or six matches in the Los Angeles area, matched against some of the top wrestlers from the colleges and universities around. They had won five out of six matches and had tied the sixth one. Mr. Hendricks was speaking to one of these young men, a champion wrestler. It is a thrill to be a champion in any sport, it is a good feeling, a great feeling. This young man said to Howard Hendricks,

"You know, I've come to see that wrestling is just peanuts. Wrestling isn't important. I'm not a wrestler -- I'm a witness." By those words he was expressing this fact: There is nothing more exciting than to have the power of the gospel flowing through you to change someone else's life.

Look at what Paul says about this, in closing.

- It is universal in its appeal: It is for Jews and for Greeks. These were the two divisions of the world from the Jewish point of view. Anyone, anywhere in the world, is a proper subject for this gospel. It is designed for all men. It is not provincial, it is not national; it is designed for men everywhere.
- Further, it is wholesome in its results: Notice what the result is: Salvation. Perhaps we do not like that word because it has been so badly abused. We think of *salvation* as some kind of religious piousness; a kind of religious formaldehyde in which people are steeped, which has no attraction whatsoever. But that is a wrong use of the term. Salvation is nothing less than wholeness: It is to be a whole person, a person who is restored to what he ought to be, and what God intended him to be. That is what is the glorious thing about this gospel. It is not creating plaster saints who walk around in separation from the common, mundane things around them; it is creating people who live, who love to live, and to live at the heart of life, yet who live well-adjusted, wholesome lives, at peace with themselves and at peace with God.
- Notice also that it is mighty in its nature: It is power, says the apostle, living power, a living force. It is not some kind of a peace tablet dropped into the heart which gives a momentary comfort. No, no. It is a force that goes to work and keeps on working away, driving you out of yourself, thrusting you on. You can't sleep sometimes because it keeps working on you. You can't run away from it, you can't evade it. It is there, and it keeps pushing, and pushing relentlessly, driving you on. It is a living force at work in your life. It is the kind of power that nothing else can equal because it is resurrection power. It works in the midst of death. It works best in a cemetery. If you are living in a cemetery you are a fit candidate for the power of God. Resurrection power works when nothing else will work.
- Finally, it is simple in its acceptance: It is by faith. By faith! That's all, by believing, by commitment to it. It comes by a man or a woman saying, "I don't understand everything about it, but I've seen enough to know that it's true -- I'll follow it anyway." And they do. That commitment of faith to Jesus Christ is the door by which life is opened.

There we have it. Here is the man God uses consistently, continuously, the man who is confident in the power of God, confident that God is at work, confident that he will be at work in his life -- because this is not just for apostles, it is for everyone. Paul said that he was a pattern for everyone of how this Christian life works.

The first note of it is that to become confident God is at work, that he can work, does work, and will work, and that he is quite able to do what nothing else can do.

Second, here is a man who is constrained, moved, and is motivated, not by the need around him, but by the face before him -- by the love of the Lord Jesus and the expectation of that day when he will stand at last in his presence and all of his life will be in review. I think it is a salutary thing to think often of that moment. I do. What is the Lord going to say about my life when I stand before him? What is he going to say about yours? How much of it has been self-centered, and how much has been risked, ventured, hazarded for his dear sake?

Finally, because of these two things, the man God uses is a man who is committed, who is eager, who says, "Lord, whatever you want, whenever you want it, I'm ready to follow you."

I remember a friend telling me he followed one of these great fruit trucks down the road and on the back of it was a sign that read,

ANY LOAD, ANY PLACE, ANY TIME.

That is a wonderful motto for Christians: Any load, Lord, any place, Lord, any time.

I don't live up to that, but I tell you, I want to, and may God help me to do so. I trust you will join me in that!

Title: The Man God Uses
Series: Single Message: Doctrinal Topics
Scripture: Rom 1:13-16
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 281
Date: July 21, 1968

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