

CAPTURING BY CRAFT

by Ray C. Stedman

We are learning now that the gospel is not only the answer to religious man's search for God, but also it is the only ultimate solution to the terrible problems of society. In this present sick world, many today are wondering if we have not already gone too far, if even the widespread demonstration of Christian love and the proclamation of the truth of God is too late to reverse the tide. Those of us who live in Palo Alto were startled and alerted a few weeks ago by a letter from the mayor of our city, informing us that the situation on drug traffic in the high schools with our students is very serious indeed. The latest estimates are that something like 50% of high school young people have already experimented with drugs. Your children may be among those who have not done so -- but then again they may be. But whatever the situation, it is a serious problem and one that we ought to be greatly concerned about.

Also, public morality in our day has fallen to an incredible low. Wife-swapping is a common procedure here in California. Sexual perversion is rampant in this state and is rapidly spreading across the nation, and in other parts of the world as well. In these days you can almost feel the violence and lawlessness that seethes beneath the surface in any situation in which humans are gathered. There may be some truth to the statement I heard this week, that we are watching a nation die.

Yet I do not say this in a pessimistic way. I personally believe that there are signs of returning health in our nation that are most encouraging. Most of it is being expressed in channels other than the expected, outside the boundaries of the conventional or the traditional. And, for the most part, I welcome these expressions. There is a great deal that is unconventional in our day which we cannot welcome, but much of this is to be welcomed and certainly we ought to know what it is to be rejoiced in, and what is to be discouraged. But I wish to point out, in this present series, that the city of Corinth, in Paul's day, had very similar problems to our own. It, too, was infested with what Paul calls *strongholds* of evil which enslaved the populace. They were very much the same strongholds that we see today. There was racial tension and sexual immorality, very widespread and very powerfully entrenched in the city of Corinth. There were difficulties between relatives and families, there was social feuding, and political tyranny was abundant under the heel of the Roman empire.

The Apostle Paul had come into that city and was attacking those problems. Surely it is unrealistic to view the apostle as coming in merely as a religious personage, declaring a religious message. He was coming to declare to the citizens of Corinth the solution to the problems that were gripping them as individuals and as a society. We must approach our present series in that same light. Paul was attacking those problems with the weapons of love, truth, righteousness, and faith-prayer (those two things that belong so intimately together). In other words, he was preaching the gospel and demonstrating the gospel. And he was highly successful. Already a colony of health had been implanted in that Corinthian community which we call *the church at Corinth*. Though there were still great problems, and Paul was still attacking some of the strongholds that remained entrenched, yet he is reminding us again and again throughout these letters that he is attacking them, not with the weapons of the world but, as he says in Second Corinthians 10:3-5, the passage we are considering,

For the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. {2 Cor 10:3-4 RSV}

He goes on to declare,

We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, {2 Cor 10:5 RSV}

We have already seen that, in this sense, the gospel is unique in the world. It is the only thing of its kind. It has no rival. I stress that because I find it emphasized throughout the whole of the Scripture. When you are talking about "the truth as it is in Jesus" {cf, Eph 4:21}, you are introducing a radically new element into any

human situation, and that radical element alone has the ability to correct the wrong that is present.

But the gospel is not only unique; it works uniquely. That is what we saw in our last study. It does not attack the arguments and reasonings of men directly; it is not engaged in mere counter-argument. In other words, it tries to avoid, if possible, the eyeball-to-eyeball encounter, but it works by capturing the arguer. It reaches the man behind the argument; it skirts his defenses and comes at him from unexpected directions and thus delivers men who are involved in dire problems.

We must understand that the problems of our day do not exist apart from people. They are caused by people. These people act the way they do because they are victims of ideas which they believe to be right or wrong, as the case may be, and you cannot unravel the knots that constitute the problems without somehow reaching the people involved. If you change the people you have solved the problem, so it is very true that the gospel deals directly with these problems of social concern.

It is this elusive attack, this roundabout approach which captures the man despite the fact that he is constantly building a defense by arguments and reasons, that is so uniquely characteristic of the good news of Jesus Christ. Our Lord was referring to this when he said to his disciples, "Be wise as serpents but harmless as doves," {cf, Matt 10:16}. That is the Christian approach. This is exemplified by the Apostle Paul in this very letter when he says to these Corinthians, "being crafty I caught you with guile," {2 Cor 12:16}. I came at you in a way that you did not expect. I captured you by craftiness, and a very remarkable kind of craftiness.

We are trying to discover how this works in our own day. We have already seen one way in which it is done:

First, as we saw last week, the gospel speaks to the vacuums in man's spirit which are not buttressed and protected by the specious reasonings by which he tries to defend his pride. The gospel gets behind that and speaks to the empty places in man's spirit, the vacuums. The gospel is a thoroughly supernatural message, i.e., it talks about things that are not subject to the explorations of science or the discoveries of rational approaches. It speaks of relationships between God and man, the deep things of man's spirit. Since man is a being created by God to have this kind of a relationship, the gospel makes its silent appeal to the deep-seated hungers of man's heart and does so despite the arguments that he may have devised to protect himself. That is why, when the gospel is spoken in power, it raises certain fears within an individual and awakens deep longings within him.

I was told this week of a man -- the husband of a woman in this congregation -- who regularly tears up my messages when she brings them home. But he always reads them first! This is perfectly fine with me. But it is remarkable that he never destroys them without reading them first. Surely this reveals something about the man: He is longing for the expression of truth and his defenses will eventually crumble under that kind of an approach.

There is a verse in Ecclesiastes that is marvelously significant in this connection. It says "God has made everything beautiful in its time," {cf, Eccl 3:11a RSV}. Man always agrees with that. But then it goes on to say, "also he has put eternity into man's mind," {Eccl 3:11b RSV}. Man can never forget that. He is an eternal being, and he knows it. Despite the superficiality of his life there are cries from the depths of his heart to which the gospel speaks.

Furthermore, the gospel appeals to any man or woman by offering to deal with the foul residues of sin in his life. We only have to look around us, or within us, to realize that sinful man is always plagued by the by-products of his own sin:

- Guilt is one. Guilt always accompanies sin: it cannot help but do so. It is part of the inevitable law of consequences around which life itself is built, and man cannot escape it. There is no way that he can escape no matter how hard he tries.

I was reminded this week of a man who wrote to the Internal Revenue Service and sent in a considerable amount of money as payment on taxes which he had not reported. In an accompanying note he said, "I haven't been able to sleep at night because of this evasion of taxes and I'm sending

this because I want to clear up my conscience. If I find that I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest of it.

How well that illustrates that we cannot evade this matter of guilt!

- Fear is another of those foul residues of sin: The fear and anxiety that troubles, the pressure of worry that throbs away in the back of the head all day long draining away nervous vitality and leading one a nervous wreck at night. In many cases, this is the result of ignorant evil that is allowed to be present in the heart.
- Hostility is still another residue of sin that grips man in his sinful condition. He cannot escape it, no matter how much he tries to like people. There are some people that arouse him, irritate him, and he finds himself hostile against them and he cannot subdue it in himself.
- A fourth residue is the confusion which so widely abounds, the inability to make decisions, the inability to determine what is right and wrong, what leads up and what leads down. This is so widely evident in our day.

Here is where the gospel comes with great power and makes its appeal to the man who finds himself in the grip of these things. It speaks to him by revealing that there is a way out. He may not believe it at first, but still it makes its subtle appeal to his heart. These foul results of evil in human life create bondage. They produce a sense of helplessness and despair. Our present situation in the world is ample testimony to this. You well know that behind the bright facades of success and confidence which many people erect, there are deep and gloomy pools of gross, dark despair. The gospel offers power -- power to break these chains. That is the glory of it. The story of Jesus Christ is one demonstration after another of his authority to free men from the chains that bind them. Read the gospel records again and you will find that this is the thing that attracted people to him that drew multitudes out after him; this awareness of his authority to set men free.

This is the great proclamation we make. Here is One who entered the stream of humanity and who can do something about these desperate things that grip and hold our spirits in implacable bondage.

He breaks the power of cancelled sin
He sets the prisoner free.
His blood can make the foulest clean
His blood availed for me.

Men feel drawn to Jesus Christ because of this despite themselves.

I remember several years ago visiting a man whose wife was a new Christian, but he himself was not. He met me at the door with a very belligerent attitude. Obviously he had a chip on his shoulder. As we tried to discuss the matters of Christian faith, he was harsh, cold, and difficult, and finally ordered me out of the house. But I sensed beneath all this a real hunger, so later in the week I called him at his work and asked him to join me for lunch. Not surprisingly to me, he said he would. We met together over a luncheon table in San Francisco and I told him that what he needed was the Lord. I found him open and responsive. We walked to the elevators together after lunch and I left him standing there. He told me later that as the elevator was going down, while he was standing yet at the doors, he opened his heart to Christ. His home was healed, and his life was changed. He was drawn, despite himself, to the One who could and did change him into a fluent witness for Jesus Christ, and he has been greatly used of God.

That is the power of the gospel. It destroys arguments by reaching the man behind the argument.

Second it destroys arguments and humbles pride because it is always accompanied by acts of true love. Here again is a secret of the power of the gospel. I mean to distinguish now between acts of true love and those acts of official help which are often offered through relief and welfare agencies, interracial programs, etc., in our day. Not that these cannot be often helpful, I do not mean to imply otherwise, but anyone who has worked in this area at all knows that people are quick to distinguish between that which is offered from a heart brimming

over with genuine love and concern, and that which is merely the discharging of an obligation because of a job that has been undertaken by a welfare agency. There is a great deal of difference. The true always involves real interest and time spent beyond the call of duty on the part of the one desiring to help.

Some of our staff were commenting this week on Jesus words "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," {John 15:13 RSV}. It was pointed out that laying down your life does not always mean dying; it means giving of yourself. It means taking the time, the interest, and the money, or whatever else it may take to reach someone personally. That is laying down your life, and that is the mark of true love. It is not merely passing out a tract or the giving of a testimony. That has been one of the problems with the evangelical church. We have felt this whole matter of the proclaiming of the gospel has been to declare certain truths, to declare certain statements either in printed or verbal form, and, having done that, we have preached the gospel. But no, you do not find that picture in the Scriptures. It is the laying down of lives along with the proclamation. It is the involving of self, it is the act of sharing love that drives the message home and makes the truth viable.

That was wonderfully illustrated recently in the articles which appeared in the newspaper about the boy who was involved in the death of a teen-age girl in this community through an overdose of drugs. As a result, he was charged with murder and put in Juvenile Hall in San Jose. A young man whom some of you have met, and who has been on this platform, Gordon McLean, of Youth For Christ, has been working with such youths in Juvenile Hall. He does not merely go there and distribute some tracts or hand out some Christian literature, but he involves himself in long hours of patient, wearying, listening and help. As a result, he reached this young man and won him for Christ. He, in turn, has become a powerful instrument for awakening young people to the dangers of drugs and to introduce them to the means of deliverance in Jesus Christ.

That could not have been done without an act of committed, sacrificial, love. These acts are what gives the gospel its power in the hearts and lives of many. That is why we have listed in the bulletin this week certain opportunities for help, and ask you seriously to consider opening your homes, or involving your lives in some way to help. This is none other than what the Lord Jesus himself asks of us. If we are going to proclaim this message in all its full-orbed power, it must be done with the accompaniment of acts of love which demand involvement.

Third, the gospel destroys arguments and humbles pride by presenting the indisputable record of changed lives. It produces righteousness in people, undeniably. Here is where the weapons of righteousness come in, "on the right hand and on the left," {2 Cor 6:7b KJV}. The gospel has demonstrated that it works, that it changes people. That record has power to break down arguments and to humble pride.

There are a thousand illustrations of this that can be given right out of this congregation. There are men who are here this morning because they saw in their wife a completely changed person when she came to know Jesus Christ. There are wives who are here because their husbands, or sons, or daughters, were different, remarkably different, when they came to know Jesus Christ.

The Scripture uses a beautiful phrase to describe the consistent life of a believer: "the beauty of holiness," {1 Chr 16:29, 2 Chr 20:21, Psa 29:2, 96:9}. There is no beauty like it; that marvelous charm in a life that is right, balanced, wholesome, that is dedicated, committed to the Son of God. The beauty of holiness! There is nothing else like it. It is powerfully compelling to unbelievers. You can feel it when you read the life of David Brainard, or a modern saint like Jim Elliot. There are compelling stories when you see something of the beauty of their lives. You can hear this quality in some of the hymns we sing, those particularly by Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, or John Newton. How many have sensed it in the great hymn, *Amazing Grace*?

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found;
was blind, but now I see.

I suppose the classic illustration of this powerful appeal of the gospel is the story of the experience of my patron saint and mentor, Dr. H. A. Ironside. Many of you know that for years he was a captain of the

Salvation Army in San Francisco. He told me that frequently the Salvation Army would march down Market Street and hold open-air meetings down by the Ferry Building. At one of these meetings young Harry Ironside was challenged by an atheist as to the truth and power of the Christian gospel. He spoke very eloquently and powerfully, answering the claims of the gospel in an intellectual way. But Harry Ironside stopped him by proposing a challenge. He said, "Look. You say that our message is not the truth, and that we're teaching people a lie, hoodwinking them, and bringing them into a religious delusion. Now I'd like to propose something to you: Next week let's meet here again on this spot. You bring with you an individual who has been, perhaps, a drunkard or a prostitute or has known evil in some open, flagrant form, but who has been changed by your message of atheism. Bring him with you, and let him bring testimony to the change that has come by believing the teachings of atheism. For everyone you bring, I'll bring a hundred with me who have been set free by the gospel of Jesus Christ." The man said, "I'm sorry, I can't meet you on those terms."

Surely that is the power of the gospel.

Why do I say all this? Because I want to open your eyes to the power of a Christian in today's society. I want to encourage, if I can, the wider expression of Christian faith, and bolder, more confident approaches to others around you on these matters. Surely the bankruptcy of other approaches is increasingly apparent in our day. Leaders of various other approaches to society's ills are now confessing openly their failure and their inability to solve these problems. I am trying to encourage you to see that this good news of Jesus Christ is the only hope for society. It always has been, and it always will be. Surely we need to declare this in a world that has gone wrong at its very base.

I want to reserve for a full message the last method by which the gospel destroys arguments and humbles pride, the method of faith-prayer.

Let me close now by reminding you of those stirring words of the Apostle Paul to the Christians who lived in the capital of the Roman empire, the center of the world of their day. In the 13th chapter of Romans he closes with these words. I give them to you in Phillips' rendering:

The night is nearly over; the day has almost dawned. Let us therefore fling away the things that men do in the dark; let us arm ourselves for the fight of the day! Let us live cleanly, as in the daylight, not in the "delights" of getting drunk or playing with sex, nor yet in quarreling or jealousies. Let us be Christ's men from head to foot, and give no chances to the flesh to have its fling. {Rom 13:12-14 J. B. Phillips}

Prayer

Our Father, these stirring words challenge our hearts. How sick our world is. How desperately it needs the healing remedy that flows from our Lord Jesus Christ. How dark it has become; how noticeably, even in this last year, darkness has settled upon people everywhere. Lord, we thank you for the light that streams from the cross and the tomb of our Lord Jesus, and ask that we may declare this message in its full power, its full-orbed ability to change, to deliver, and to free men from themselves. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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