

THE CHRISTIAN'S TRANQUILIZER

by Ray C. Stedman

In the letter of First John we are now examining the theme of love which, as you recognize, is unquestionably the most talked-about subject in the world today. In the beatnik brothels of Haight-Ashbury it is perhaps the most popular word in the hippie language; the jargon of psychologists and psychiatrists is certainly replete with references to love; and from Hollywood we encounter their version of love in enormous quantities of technicolor and stereophonic passion. Thus, this is easily the most talked-about subject in all humanity. Yet it is easy to see that, though the world continues to talk about love, it actually grows increasingly more loveless. The less we know of love, the more are inclined to talk about it.

In this passage in First John, the third chapter, we see that John is contrasting the themes of love and hate. Hate is self-centeredness; love is self-giving. Hate originates with the devil; love comes only from God. Hate results in deception and destruction; love results in helping and healing. These are acts, and this process exemplifies the evolution of all action; first is born passion, the attitude, the thought, and then follows the act. Love, when it has conceived, brings forth help and health; hate, when it has conceived, brings forth deception and death.

Now, in the rest of the chapter, the Apostle John is stressing the importance of the act, or deed, of love. Love must issue at last in something you do, or say. It must be more than simply a warm thought of the heart, or an intended or imagined act. But as John now will tell us, when love becomes a deed, it does three very valuable and important things for us: It reassures a doubting heart, it gives boldness and effectiveness to prayer, and it evidences a Spirit-filled life. Those are the themes that John develops in the latter part of Chapter 3, from Verse 19 to the end of the chapter. Today we shall take the first of these.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. {1 Jn 3:19-20 RSV}

In that phrase, "whenever our hearts condemn us," the Apostle John is recognizing that the problem we face is that of a condemning heart, a condemning conscience. He suggests here in this phrase that this is a rather frequent and oftentimes involuntary experience on our part. Who of us as a Christian has not had trouble with a bad conscience or a condemning heart? As we saw in our studies in Ephesians this is often because of an attack of the evil one. Sometimes it can come about from nothing more serious than having eaten too late the night before. There are physical problems which affect us spiritually, but all too often this is the result of an attack of the evil one upon our faith, an attempt to try to dislodge us from faith in Jesus Christ, to overthrow us and disarm us and annul our effectiveness as Christians. And all too often this attack succeeds.

Perhaps there is nothing more common than this very problem -- Christians who are suffering from a bad conscience, from a condemning heart. Sometimes these attacks come upon us in the midst of our most spiritual moods, attacking us when we least expect, with no apparent reason whatsoever. We can go to bed at night, happy and relaxed and refreshed in the Lord, and wake up with a gnawing, guilty spirit, a condemning heart. We can be enjoying the fellowship of God's people and feeling at ease with the Spirit of God, with everything well between us, and only a few hours later be suffering from a sense of uneasiness, a vague undetermined sense of guilt or condemnation.

Now this is the problem that John is facing, and you will recognize how common it is, and how frequently it occurs. When it occurs it usually does so because of at least one of three conditions that are present in our lives. The problem often occurs when we have committed some very gross or repeated sin, i.e., if we fall into a bad temper, or indulge in some lustful experience, or we give way to the urge to take someone else's property, or steal another's reputation, or to injure another person, these things in our life that we know to be wrong. As Christians, if we fall into these experiences, we are bound immediately to suffer from a guilty conscience. The Spirit of God is quick to make us feel guilty about these things. But this is not the condition that is in view in this paragraph. John has already handled this problem. If we have a guilty heart because of the commitment of some evil act or sin, there is only one channel of return, only one way back: "Confess your sin," John says, "our God is faithful to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," {cf, 1 Jn 1:9}. There is only one thing to do when we are conscious of having committed something that is wrong, and which produces a sense of guilt or condemnation. Confess it! Agree with God about it, and the cleansing that God has already provided in Jesus Christ will abundantly wash away the sense of guilt. You well know that experience, but that is not what John is talking about here.

In this passage it is the other two conditions that are primarily in view. Here John is concerned about the times when we have a sense of guilt or condemnation because we have been ignored or misunderstood or mistreated. Who has not had this experience? Perhaps you are suffering from it right now. Perhaps you have a sense of resentment and a sense of failure because of something you have done to which nobody has paid any attention. You have been working so hard and you have been ignored. Perhaps some of you mothers feel that way this Mother's Day. You feel that you are not properly appreciated and from that comes a sense of condemnation in your spirit. How frequently this can occur. You have labored long but no one seems to notice it, no one seems to care that you have put forth so much effort.

Or, perhaps, you did something out of a perfectly honest and open motive, intending to bless and help someone else, but they misunderstood. Instead of being grateful they were angry with you and even denounced you, scolded you, or accused you of wrong or of a less-acceptable motive. You feel condemned and guilty over that. Here you are, appalled by the reaction you have experienced, crushed, hurt. And at that moment you are tempted to believe some of these accusations. You say to yourself, "Maybe they're right, maybe I haven't been motivated rightly after all. How do I know that my heart was right? I thought it was, but perhaps others see more clearly than I. Maybe I'm not even a Christian at all." The enemy is quick to use this to bring condemnation, if he can. You may say to yourself, "Perhaps my motives were selfish, after all. Perhaps I'm only self-deceived in this matter." And thus your heart condemns you. That is the experience John is describing here.

In the second case, it may occur when, for one reason or another, you have been long inactive as Christian. You have not been doing much; perhaps you have not been able to. You have been disabled, laid aside, sick, or even you have been on too long a vacation, and you have a sense of not accomplishing much. You have been resting a long time, and have not done anything. Here again, the enemy is quick to come in and try to twist this into a sense of condemnation. He says, "The trouble with you is, you don't care anymore. The reason you don't care is because, basically, you're not even a Christian. You've grown indifferent. Look how useless you are, look how worthless you are to the cause of Christ. How can you call yourself a Christian and feel this way? You have such a lack of concern for the things of God and the work of God." You do not recognize this as the voice of the evil one, you feel it is your own heart speaking and you feel a sense of condemnation.

A number of years ago I was called on to visit a dear old Presbyterian pastor, retired, who was then over 94 years old. He had grown old in the service of God, with a wonderful record of faithful service to the Lord behind him. He called me on the phone one morning and asked me to come to see him. I found him plunged into the depths of gloom and despair. He said to me, "I've been thinking about my life and how

little it has counted for Christ." With tears running down his face, he looked up at me and said, "Oh, Ray, I wonder sometimes if I'm even saved." What was the trouble? The enemy was using the circumstances of his long inactivity, his inability to do something active for the Lord, as an opportunity to bring him under condemnation. "Whenever our hearts condemn us," that is the problem, is it not? What a common one it is. It occurs so frequently and seemingly without good reason at all.

Now what is the remedy? Well, look at what John says. We must "know that we are of the truth." That is the essential thing. We must reestablish the great fact of our relationship to Christ. We must have ground for believing and reassuring ourselves that we are indeed "justified by faith," standing in God's presence not by our own righteousness, but by the righteousness of the Son of God, that we are accepted in the Beloved, that we are "in Christ," because, as Paul tells us in Romans 8, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those that are in Christ," {cf, Rom 8:1}. In Christ all that he is appears on our behalf and therefore there is no condemnation to us. Now, therefore, if we are going to silence the doubts of our hearts, we must know that we are "of the truth." That is where we must begin.

This is what we saw in Ephesians where the Apostle Paul urges us to put on the breastplate of righteousness {cf, Eph 6:14}, by which the heart is guarded, the emotions, which are so easily subject to discouragement, gloom, and despair. Put on the breastplate of righteousness. Realize again that you are "of the truth," for it is by the mind's knowledge that the heart's doubts are silenced.

Now how do you do that? Notice his argument here. "By this," he says. "By this we know that we are of the truth." We must know that we are of the truth in order to reassure our condemning hearts, and how do we do it? By this! By what? Well, what he has just mentioned in Verse 18. "Little children, let us not love in word or speech [only] but in deed and in truth." By this shall we reassure our hearts by the knowledge that we are of the truth. He is referring here to the deed or act of love, i.e., to deliberately, and with specific intent, do a kind and helpful deed, or speak a loving word to the one (or ones) who has injured us or has caused us to be plunged into this morass of condemnation. "Return good for evil," in other words. This is what John is teaching here, just as Paul taught, and as all the apostles taught, following the words of the Lord Jesus himself, "Bless those that persecute you. Do good to those who do evil to you. Return good for evil," {cf, Matt 5:44}.

Now that is radical, is it not? That is revolutionary -- so much so that we find it very difficult to do. We reject it, for the most part, and that is why so much of our time is spent under a sense of condemnation. For, as John says, it is this that makes us know that we are of the truth. It is when the love and good intentions of our heart actually work out into some response, some deed, some activity of love and concern for those who injure us.

Now take the two conditions that we have set before you. When you are ignored or misunderstood, when you have done the right thing and somebody has taken it the wrong way, what is your reaction, what do you feel like doing? Well, I know how I feel, and I am sure you feel the same way, for all of us are made in the same mold -- only some are moldier than others. You want to strike back, do you not? You want to say a caustic, nasty thing in return. You want to refuse any further contact with that individual. "All right, let him go. If that's the way he feels about it, I'll go my way and let him go his."

Well now, what is John saying? "Don't do this," he says. Leave the whole matter in God's hands. Do not strike back. Forgive that individual and forget the thing that is causing you difficulty. Take it patiently. Forget the offense, as the Lord Jesus gave us the example: Peter reminds us, "When he was reviled, he reviled not again but committed himself into the hands of him who judges righteously," {cf, 1 Pet 2:23}. That is a radical response, is it not? What a revolutionary activity this is that we are called upon to perform, to act in love. But when we do, John says, there immediately comes a sense of peace, a sense of reassurance. The Spirit within quickens us with the knowledge that we are of the truth. We are indeed

sons and daughters of the Father, "who is kind to the ungrateful and to the selfish," {Luke 6:35b RSV}. We are manifesting the character of the One to whom we truly belong.

In 1960 it was my privilege to visit Viet Nam and to speak to a conference of pastors gathered from the length and breadth of that little country. It was just before the outbreak of the war that is now raging there. We met with some 300 pastors down in the delta area where the fighting is now so intense, in the little village of Vinh Long. During the course of the conference one of the pastors came to the interpreter and asked if he would arrange a meeting with me. The meeting was set up and the pastor came to see me, and, through the interpreter, poured out a tale of distress of heart. He recounted how he had been woefully mistreated by his brethren in the ministry, how he had been cut out of an office that he had felt was properly his and had been set aside (rather roughly he felt) and another man put in his place. The thing was rankling in his spirit and he was very disturbed. At this conference he wanted to have a full airing of the matter while all the men were gathered together. He said, "What do you think I ought to do? Don't you think I should take advantage of this and see that the whole matter is brought out and have this other man thrown out so I can have my proper place?" I turned to the second chapter of Philippians and had the interpreter read to him in his own language those wonderful words,

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. {Phil 2:5-8 RSV}

I suggested that he forget the whole matter. He did not accept this then, but later on, as the conference went on and the Holy Spirit began to work in wonderful ways, I could see that he was struggling with the matter. At the end of the conference, after a wonderful time of blessing, he came up to me and said through the interpreter, "You were right. God has been dealing with my heart. It was only to try to justify myself that I was thinking all these things. God has helped me to put the whole matter aside. What a sense of joy and peace is mine now."

Now, that is exactly what John is talking about. By this, by this response of genuine self-giving love to another who has injured us, we prove to ourselves that we are of the truth and thus reassure our condemning hearts. Dr. F. B. Meyer sometime ago wrote this:

"We make a mistake in trying always to clear ourselves. We should be wiser to go straight on, humbly doing the next thing and leaving God to vindicate us. 'He shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light and thy judgment as the noonday.' There may come hours in our lives when we shall be misunderstood, slandered, falsely accused. At such times it is very difficult not to act on the policy of the men around us in the world. They want to appeal to law and force and public opinion. But the believer takes his case into a higher court and lays it before his God."

That is exactly what John is suggesting to us. "Well," you ask, "what about the third condition? What about the problem when I have been inactive or disabled, unable to do something, and my heart feels guilty or condemned because of this? What does John say about that?" The same thing! Do a deed of love, he says, even if it is no more than to say a prayer for someone, or to write a letter, or to send a gift. Let that nature of love which is within you express itself in some form. Help another. Give of yourself.

I am personally convinced that this is one of the greatest causes for doubt and torment among Christians. Especially is it true among older Christians, those who have retired, who have served a long time and feel themselves entitled to a rest. Perhaps in many ways they are entitled to a rest, but we are never entitled to retire from the Christian faith and the proper expression of it. I am afraid oftentimes older Christians succumb to a sense of self-pity and give themselves over to self-interest. Everything they do is related to what they want, and, as a consequence, there is little expression of concern for others or

ministry to others. There is, therefore, no power to resist an accusing conscience.

John is suggesting something very practical here. Call up a lonely friend. Write a cheerful letter. Call on another person. Read a story to a child, for Christ's sake. "By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us." Now John offers an explanation of why this works. "Because," he says, "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." God knows that self-giving love is not a natural thing for the human heart. It is not natural to respond in kindness to those who do evil to us. It is very unnatural for one who is an unbeliever. To genuinely return good for evil is simply impossible to an unregenerate nature. Therefore, God knows that the accusations of our hearts are wrong. He knows everything. God is greater than our hearts. He knows that these lying accusations that we are really not Christians, not really in Christ, not really of the truth, are wrong. You are of the truth, and therefore you can forgive another, and you can bless another heart, and you can minister in grace to another. You can do something to help someone else in need. Now do it.

And when you do, that great underlying truth which God knows but which you have temporarily forgotten, will be things that you can point to in your life that are not merely professed or imagined or intended, but actual things that God has enabled you to do that are entirely unnatural to the Adamic life, that can reassure you that you are of the faith. "By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts before him."

I was struck by the words of John R. W. Stott, of All Souls Langham Place, in London, in his commentary on this passage. From them I borrowed the title of this message. Dr. Stott says, "Stronger than any chemical tranquilizer is trust in our all-knowing God." I am sure these words have great practical value for God's people. What is a tranquilizer but an attempt by chemical means to achieve ease of spirit, peace of heart? Has not God made ample provision for this through the spiritual mechanism of reassuring our hearts before him by means of the expression of active love in our lives? All this passage is really saying to us is that most of the problems of anxiety, restlessness, and guilt would be tremendously alleviated, if not completely eliminated, by some deliberate, active expression in deeds of self-giving love.

Now be deliberate about it. There is nothing wrong with that. You do not have to wait until you are forced to be nice to somebody. Do it deliberately. Set yourself to the task of finding another person in need and helping him out. "Let us not love in word and speech but in deed and in mouth." For a dozen years now I have been watching this spirit of practical love take hold of the lives of many here. It has been a joy to see how many times these words have proved true. People have discovered that much of loneliness and weakness and emptiness of their lives was simply a result of shutting themselves away from the needs of others. As soon as they began to minister to another's life, to be no longer concerned with their own interests but pouring themselves out on behalf of others -- others who oftentimes had no claim upon them -- they discovered that there was an accompanying wonderful sense of reassurance and an awakening of the spirit of joy in their own hearts. What a practical way to apply this great truth.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for these words which are of such intense practicality that we tend to escape them and to lose the effect of them upon our own hearts. But, Lord, teach us now to be responsive and thus discover that your word is wonderfully true; that anyone who begins to obey it will find for himself that these things work exactly as you have outlined to us. Make us, therefore, responsive today, to return good for evil, a loving word for a harsh one, a kind and thoughtful expression in place of sarcasm and causticness of spirit. Grant to us, Lord, to find the lonely and the distressed and the depressed and to speak to them, encourage them, and to share something of ourselves with them that we might thus express

this kind of love. By this shall we know that we are of the truth. We thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: The Christian's Tranquilizer

By: Ray C. Stedman

Scripture: 1 Jn 3:19-20

Date: May 14, 1967

Series: Maintaining Love

Message No: 3

Catalog No: 159

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