



The Struggle for Inner Peace

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LESSON 8: POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE NEGATIVE

Our description of man has led us into a gloomy pit. How difficult we find it to face the truth we have uncovered! As we look up, however, a comforting shaft of light pierces the darkness. It is the promised way of escape.

But before observing this way of escape, let us take one more look around.

There is a reason why so many people are unhappy, why there is so much conflict between individuals. Isaiah pinpointed the trouble long ago: "We have turned, every one, to his own way" (Isa. 53:6).

You like your own ideas, plans, aspirations, and longings. So does everyone else. Thus when a man encounters resistance to his wishes, or faces demands that are not to his liking, he tends to rebel, to attack, to run, or to defend himself. His natural reaction is to be resentful, bitter, stubborn, full of fight. It is easy for a person to think that his own desires are the reasonable ones. He will find a way to make a selfish drive seem selfless, deceiving even himself.

Furthermore, it is natural to shrink away from a glimpse of oneself. To back off from reproof is as human as shielding the eyes from a burst of light in a dark room. Again, Jeremiah's assessment of the heart, that it is deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9), and Jesus' statement that men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19) are as up to date as the literature on psychology that describes the mental mechanics for evading the truth.

The patterns of deceit and self-defense are so systematized that their names are common dictionary words. We have considered rationalization, regression, suppression, repression, extroversion, introversion, compartmental thinking, and projection—some of the more common ways of turning from the truth about oneself. To peer further into the darkness, such avenues can lead to psychoses requiring hospitalization—or to broken homes, crime, vice, or even murder or suicide.

Such is the heart of man. One shudders to contemplate its potential for evil. The Bible and literature on psychology alike paint this oppressive picture.

SCRIPTURE'S ACCURATE DIAGNOSIS

But, as already mentioned, there is hope. Since, in this presentation, we are looking to the Bible as our guide, we can turn to it not only for a description of man as he naturally is, but for the path away from our disturbances, neuroses, and psychoses and to peace.

"Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble," said the psalmist in Psalm 119:165. Is this possible?

Many persons turn to a counselor for help because they are in circumstances that offend them or have caused them to stumble. They are dissatisfied, irritated, unhappy. Either they flee from the vexing situation or attack it. One would think that people would rush to buy a book that pointed out the path to peace and freedom from offense. People *do* buy it—by the millions every year. The Bible continues to be the all-time bestseller. But it is a Book that most persons quickly lay aside.

Though man's hope lies in God and His Word, many people quickly turn aside from the Bible because it reproves and corrects. Man simply does not like the truth about himself that he finds in God's Word.

Churches are criticized because their ministers upset people when they preach about the sinfulness of man and the inflexible standards of the Bible. Once I had a long conversation with a fellow counselor about the value of "deeper life" conferences, in which the details of the ideal Christian life are discussed. He felt very strongly against this type of conference. He believed it did irreparable damage because after such a conference a wave of very upset people came to him. That they could not attain perfection greatly disturbed them.

People have often turned to me as a counselor because their pastor has upset them. Having listened to him preach about sin, they feel guilty and inadequate. As they relate the details of their stories, it invariably turns out that they were much happier people before they began attending church and studying the Bible. Therefore, could it not be reasonable to conclude that their problems were caused by what they heard and read? To remove the cause would seem to relieve the person's anxiety. And this has long been advocated. There is wide spread pressure on ministers to preach "positive" messages and to emphasize the good in man.

Wait just a minute, though. Perhaps a look at the methods of other professions may help you understand the value of pointing out the "bad," the evil, the negative.

Consider the dentist's approach. Recently my dentist examined my teeth. He chatted amiably throughout the examination. He took some x-rays. I can still see him holding his picture up to the light and saying, "There is a cavity, and there is one, and there is another. You have three cavities." How negative can you get? He did not even mention the good teeth.

Then he prepared to stick a long needle into my gums—not a pleasant experience at all. The drilling was no picnic either. In fact, there is nothing about going to a dentist that I like. It makes me a bit anxious to think about going, and decidedly annoyed when his bill comes. But yet we all go to the dentist. We respect this man who subjects us only to discomfort. Why? Surely not because of the process. The results are what we want. He could give us medicine that would cut the pain of a decaying tooth and make us feel comfortable as long as its effect remained. But unless the dentist got to the source of the problem, the decay would continue, and someday the pain would be even worse.

Consider the physician. As he diagnoses you, he has only one basic question: "What is wrong?" This is certainly a "negative" approach!

If 99 percent of you is in good health, your doctor is interested in only the 1 percent of you that is not. If you have an infected fingernail and the rest of you is healthy, he concentrates on the fingernail. If you have a pain in your abdomen, he does not overlook the abdomen. Instead he examines it thoroughly, even if the examination brings you pain.

Why do you put up with such treatment? Because his objective is to restore your health. He eliminates pain and may save you from death by subjecting you to great pain and even the risk of your life on the operating table. It is positive to eliminate the negative. It is healthy to eliminate disease. It is good to eliminate evil. A neighbor in apparent good health went to her physician because she developed a slight pain. Investigation revealed a tumor and abdominal surgery was called for. The doctor's announcement of what was needed not only upset the woman, but her whole family and some people in the neighborhood as well. Why would a man want to subject this fine woman to such an ordeal? Why didn't he give her a sedative to help her forget the pain? No one would have gotten upset. But instead of prescribing a painkiller, he sent her off to a hospital, where her surgery confined her for five weeks.

Think of the effect of his diagnosis and prescription on the woman's husband, their children, their budget. But not a single person condemned the doctor. Quite the contrary, they were all grateful to him. They were appreciative of this person who had delivered such drastic, disturbing news and who had subjected her to the pain of a knife and her husband to such great expense. He would have done her a disservice to have acted otherwise.

Another thought on this subject: The diagnosis did not depend on the notions of the physician, but on the condition of the patient's body. He could not be guided by what the patient wanted to hear; rather he had to follow the course of his findings. How does one make the announcement of the need for major surgery a happy occasion? There is no way. The important thing is that the proper diagnosis be made and the patient be told. The patient will get over the shock of the announcement. My neighbor did. Then it was up to her whether she would submit to the prescribed treatment. She could have tried to ignore the pain, kept busy, and attempted to forget about her condition. She

might have tried to kill the pain with medicine. Her other alternative was to accept surgery, which she did.

An accurate diagnosis of a physical ailment is a matter for the physician. But the patient's future health is really his own decision.

To miss the mark of perfect health is common, but to deny that one is sick when he is, or to give up the quest for health, is foolish. Wisdom calls for trying to discover the cause of ill health, for the physician to give an accurate diagnosis despite the guilt, anxiety, or worry it might cause, and for the patient, for his own best interest, to follow through on the doctor's advice.

Now back to the point that ministers are pressured to emphasize the "good" and the "positive" because talk of sin and the negative is upsetting and causes anxiety and worry. Of course the knowledge of sin produces such results. But the immediate comfort of a person is of little value if there is, in fact, sin in the person's life. To diagnose sin, however disturbing it may be, is a positive act.

The minister, counselor, or friend cannot determine what the diagnosis will be. I cannot determine what my client brings to me. If there is selfishness, touchiness, irritability, stubbornness, rebellion, hate, or deceit within the person, it simply is there. I didn't put it there, but it is my responsibility to point out its presence. This may be upsetting. But I have found no other way. I have never known a person to discover the sin that is causing his trouble by my dwelling on his good qualities. And I have never found a way of pointing out a man's sin to him that makes him clap his hands with glee at the news. Jesus Christ emphasized this when He said of sinners: "But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:40).

Jesus also explained why people feel condemned and guilty: "This is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). This is why people become disturbed when they hear a minister of the Gospel preach on God's standards for man. The Bible throws light on their conduct; it exposes their souls. The truth is often offensive.

Once, after Jesus had addressed the Pharisees, His disciples said to Him: "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" (Matt. 15:12).

What had offended them? This is part of what the Lord told them:

Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man (Matt. 15:11).

Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile the man (Matt. 15:18).

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man (Matt. 15:19-20).

Though the words of Christ offended His listeners, their response did not change the truth He spoke. And herein lies tremendous hope. You may not be able to control what your wife or husband, father or mother, or anyone else does, and you may not be able to change your environment. But you don't need to, because the real source of your problem is not the people around you or your environment, but you. The things that defile you come from within *you*. And this, in a sense, is good news because *you* can be changed. But *you* must decide whether to let God change you.

THE BATTLE WITH THE WILL

To come to the decision that will lead you into the pleasant valleys of peace is to struggle with your own will. To illustrate, note the experience of Jerome Weller.

Weller was department foreman of a manufacturing firm in Trenton, New Jersey. One day his boss called him into the office and said, "Jerry, as you know, things are a bit slow around here these days. I realize you have worked hard and run one of the best departments in the company. But my orders are to cut one supervisor, so I am letting you go."

Weller was stunned. He was the only Christian among the foremen. The other supervisory personnel, including his boss, liked to go out drinking and had some pretty wild parties together. As a result, their work sometimes suffered and Jerry had to step in to rescue them. He had worked hard. This was his reward.

Weller now faced a financial slump. He had been making payments on a new home and a car. When his salary was suddenly cut off, he was in trouble. He lost both house and car and had to move in with his parents, who lived in Michigan. While with them, he had nothing to do but sit in a comfortable chair and mull over his experience.

So this is the reward for hard work and clean living, he would say to himself over and over. The more he thought, the more bitter he became. He found it hard to eat, harder to digest what little he did eat. He suffered from painful cramps. His physician told him that his condition stemmed from his emotions. But most of his friends reassured him that he had a right to have some emotional problems.

Twelve years later, time seemed to have healed the wound. Weller found another job and at this point was quite successful in it. He was, in fact, general manager of a manufacturing outfit with eight plants. One day while he was inspecting one of the plants, the personnel director asked him if he would like to meet the plant's new chief engineer. Of course he would, and did. Weller found himself face-to-face with the man

who fired him 12 years before. Here, working for him, was the person who had caused him so much grief, pain, and embarrassment.

"I sure made a terrible mistake back there," the engineer said to Weller when they were alone. "Will you forgive me?"

"Oh, certainly. Forget it," Weller replied.

Jerome Weller said he would forgive, but within himself he nursed a gnawing bitterness toward this man. His stomachache returned. He began reliving those confusing, awful days of long ago. He had thought this period of his life was long forgotten, but he found himself fuming in his plush office, wanting only to get even.

One day he related the experience to me, then asked how one could work with a person who had treated him as this man had treated him.

What would have been your reply?

GOD'S ENABLING POWER

I pointed out several Scripture passages to Jerome Weller. One was 2 Corinthians 4:7-10:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

The Apostle Paul spoke here of trouble, perplexity, persecution, rejection. All these had happened to this man. But Paul also said there is a power that will enable a man to face such treatment without distress, despair, self-pity, or ruin. It is the power of God. I discussed this with Jerry Weller, but at the time it seemed to mean little to him. I spoke of the end products of distress, pointing out that definite bodily changes are involved. Blood pressure, respiration, digestion can be affected, I said. Freedom from distress means that the body will function normally. But his body was upset.

"Are you suggesting that I am my own problem?" he asked. "Are you saying that you would have acted differently had you taken what I took?"

I assured him he was his own problem. Then I reminded him of one of Jesus' statements: "I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). This, I said, should be his attitude toward the man who had fired him.

Weller became furious with me. How could I be so lacking in sympathy and understanding? Now he was upset not only at the engineer, but at me as well.

Who was this man hurting when he carried his grudge around within himself? Who was affected when he sat in his chair in Michigan and seethed over a man who lived 700 miles away? Obviously, he was hurting only himself. Who is hurt when you get upset over someone who isn't even in your presence? You, of course.

There is a power that will enable you to face your circumstances without distress. It is the power of God, made available to you through the dying of the Lord Jesus. God's power—and His alone—can make you want to forgive one who has misused you. But Jerome Weller did not want to forgive that engineer. He wanted to get even.

He argued that he had a right to be bitter. I agreed he did and would agree with anyone who stoutly stood on his right to be angry and unforgiving over a wrong done to him. It is your privilege to be upset, to be miserable. As long as you insist on retaining your misery, you will have it.

The knowledge of sin, however, does not eliminate it or the problems that sin causes. Wise is the man who heeds the advice of the Apostle James:

Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was (James 1:22-24).

The exhortation here is to those who want to be free from their misery, who want to be lifted out of their sin. But wasn't it strange that my counselee who said he wanted relief from his upset condition became all the more upset because I told him he did not need to be upset? One would think he would have seized the opportunity to shed his spirit of bitterness and hate. But that's not man's nature.

For many persons, to yield bitterness and hatred in exchange for a tender heart toward someone who doesn't deserve it would not be blessed relief, but great sacrifice. Like the general manager, untold numbers of persons would like to be free from their aches and pains, but if to be rid of them means to relinquish a long-standing grudge, they would rather ache.

There in his walnut-paneled, softly lit office we were locked in a struggle. If I had told him that his grudge was normal and that probably I would have acted the same way, he might have enjoyed some relief, but the inner sore would have continued to fester and spread its poison.

WILLING TO YIELD

It is a mystery how a man finally quits fighting and turns to God for a spirit of love toward someone who does not deserve it. All we know is that there is generally a struggle before a man yields.

But when he does yield, his problem is nearly over. The Bible says it is *your* move. "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

One day, Jerry Weller did turn Godward for help. Today his digestive disorder is over, his aches and pains are gone. He is at peace with himself and with the man who had abused him. Jerry is enjoying God's peace, the fruit of the Spirit, in his life.

How does this change come about? By confessing or acknowledging that you have done wrong, that you have sinned. David wrote this about his sin: "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and You forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32:5).

When Weller paid attention to *his own reaction* to the other man's sins, instead of concerning himself with the man's sins, he found himself on the road to peace.

To see your sin is disturbing only if you fight what you discover. If, instead, you admit it and seek help from God, the result is not guilt but an overwhelming sense of forgiveness, cleansing, renewal, and peace.

The pathway to spiritual peace is a struggle. Discover the truth about yourself and you will naturally shrink from it; become offended and defensive and you will be bound in the strong fetters of your sin.

But what a difference you will find if you heed the promise of Jesus: "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31b-32).

Questions for review:

1. In Isaiah 53:6, Isaiah pinpoints the reason why there is so much conflict between individuals. What is that reason?
2. What did the psalmist say in Psalm 119:165?
3. Why do many people quickly turn aside from the Bible?

4. Have you, like Jerome Weller in the lesson, experienced a situation in which you were treated badly by someone else and tended to dwell on that experience? How did that make you feel? Who were you hurting by nursing a grudge?

5. When Jerome Weller paid attention to _____ to the other man's sins, instead of concerning himself with the man's sins, he found himself on the road to _____. Are you willing to do the same?

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