

As preparation for forgiveness, the Christian must first experience contrition. God Himself induces this through the message of His law. He keeps hammering away with the demands and threats of that law so that, instead of being blissfully unaware of his sin or friendly and comfortable with it, the Christian becomes concerned about it and sorry for it. Contrition makes him react to his sinfulness as an enemy to be fought rather than as a game to be played or a pleasure to be enjoyed. Contrition precedes forgiveness.

Amendment of life follows forgiveness. When by faith in Christ we accept God's forgiveness, we also accept the responsibility to do better in the future. (See chapter 8 for a complete discussion of this improvement.) Anticipation of improvement and commitment to improve are necessary elements in the attitude of the forgiven person.

As the Christian accepts God's pardon, it must not be merely because he wants to escape punishment but also because he seeks rehabilitation. Anything less reflects contempt for God's forgiveness and transforming purpose. God does not lift us out of the gutter of sin and clean us up so that we can crawl right back into it again. Rather, He cleans us up because He wants to lead us in a new and better direction. He makes this clear from the outset. Unless we are also willing to accept His gift and program of rehabilitation, we have not accepted His pardon, either. The two are inseparable.

Although Christians must be realistic about ethical and moral failures, we need not be overwhelmed by them. It is essential that we face up to them honestly and acknowledge their seriousness. There is no hope or help for us until we admit that we are failures. And yet if this admission is followed by acceptance of God's forgiveness, then hope and progress are possible. Instead of being a defeated and demoralized failure, the Christian, by virtue of his pardon through faith in Jesus, is hopeful and improving. He knows that God loves and accepts him, despite his failures.

*growth and
progress in the
Christian life*

8 IMPROVEMENT

Although failure is inevitable (chapter 7), improvement is possible, not only theoretically, but actually. In fact, improvement is more than possible. It is necessary. God does not merely offer His forgiven people changed behavior as an option or alternative. He insists upon it firmly but lovingly, because His honor, the needs of others, and our own welfare require it. In addition, He personally facilitates this improvement.

The pattern of Christian ethical and moral improvement is not a steady, upward line. Nor is it a natural, inevitable unfolding of our potential. Rather, it is the result of struggle between the new person and the old, between the Spirit and the flesh, in which the Holy Spirit asserts the victory and lordship of Christ in our lives. The course of improvement is marked by setbacks, defeats, and relapses into the old, corrupt patterns of behavior. However, it is a real movement of self and life in the direction of God's will and should be evident both to self and to others.

Some evangelicals overemphasize our continuing sinfulness, and fail to do justice to the realities of victory and success in the Christian life. While triumphalism is a distortion of the Christian posture, so is defeatism. One does not have to be a naïve per-

fectionist to take the prospect of ethical and moral progress seriously.

I. THE CHRISTIAN CAN IMPROVE

This is a promise of God to be accepted by faith and acted upon with confidence. The idea that the Christian can improve is not wishful thinking or an unattainable ideal. It is a live option, a viable alternative. We have said that ethics is the art of the possible. To the Christian, ethical and moral improvement is possible. Part of the mindset of the new person whom the Holy Spirit is shaping within him is a cautiously optimistic view of his potential for conforming more closely to the will of God.

A. Free to Obey

The Christian has heard God's own emancipation proclamation in the gospel. He knows that he has been set free from the bondage to sin and Satan. He realizes that he is no longer helplessly and hopelessly trapped in corruption. As a truly liberated person he is in a position to say yes to God and no to that which goes counter to God's will.

This concept of freedom differs sharply from many current notions of freedom. In our day, liberation movements define freedom, at least partly, as the power to say no to others and to be controlled by one's own will and interests. To the Christian, however, the highest and best freedom is the opportunity to submit to the will of God, to find fulfillment in obedience to Him. This freedom is not a natural endowment. We are born in captivity to the worst elements in and around us, deprived of the joy of an obedient relationship to God, and doomed as a result. Through God's act of deliverance in Christ, we have been rescued and released. Consequently, we are able to develop more Christ-like character and conduct. We are free to begin to obey and to improve in our obedience.

B. Justified

Another reason why the Christian knows that he can improve is that he has been justified by God. The guilt and punishment of sin which otherwise would defile and render unfit every at-

tempt to please God have been removed. Through the blood of Jesus which was shed for him, the Christian is cleansed of all that makes him and his works offensive to God. In addition, he knows that he is clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Everything right and good about God's Son, especially His perfect life and innocent death, is applied to the Christian by faith. The justified person knows that he has what it takes to become a better person in God's sight. The greatest obstacle to moral improvement is the guilt and punishment of sin, and God has dealt effectively with both.

C. Sanctified

The third reason why the Christian knows that he is capable of making moral progress is that he is being sanctified. This, too, is an essential component of the gospel message. "By the power of the Holy Spirit you can become a new person," is just as much a part of the Good News as, "Your guilt is pardoned." God is personally involved in our hearts and lives to change us. He who created us in the first place is present and active within, healing what is wrong and restoring us to righteousness. Our expectations about our ethical and moral betterment are not the result of underestimating our sinfulness. They are not merely the power of positive thinking. Rather, they are trust in the promises of God. They are a result of faith in the gospel.

II. WHAT IMPROVEMENT INVOLVES

Ethical and moral improvement cannot be verified empirically. It is not possible for us to determine with accuracy, for example, the nature and quality of motives or the existence or condition of a person's faith. We cannot know all the internal or external forces of evil against which a person has been struggling. Consequently, when trying to evaluate someone's performance in a specific area, it is not always possible to know whether we are looking at improvement or regression.

For example, in his relations with others an individual may display frequent irritation and impatience. On the surface this may appear to be regression. However, in fact it might represent dramatic improvement. This particular individual may be struggling with a violent temper or may be under tremendous

emotional pressure. For him to subdue this to mere irritation and impatience may represent a major victory of the Spirit in his life. Furthermore, God often works in very quiet and subtle ways when He is in the process of transforming someone. Variable and unknown factors (Satan, too, is often hard to detect) make precise evaluation of moral improvement impossible, not only in others but also in ourselves.

On the other hand, moral improvement is discernible to some extent. The Christian himself can detect some of the changes that God is making in his heart and life. Others can notice them too. Sometimes massive improvement takes place quickly and dramatically. In other cases it occurs on a very small scale, painfully and slowly. There are many variations, but whenever ethical and moral growth takes place, the following factors are involved.

A. Overcoming Evil

To improve involves taking the offensive against that which once held you in bondage and which still threatens you. Peace with God leads to conflict with sin and Satan. Sin is no longer regarded as a master to be obeyed, a friend to be cultivated, or a pleasure to be savored. Rather, it is regarded for what it really is—an enemy to be stopped. One mark of moral improvement is a growing militancy, an aggressive hostility against every form of evil in and around oneself.

1. Recognition

As the Holy Spirit does His transforming work, the Christian becomes increasingly sensitive to evil. He becomes proficient in detecting its presence and power both in self and in others. He regularly tests his heart and life with God's law. He evaluates every idea and influence that comes his way on the basis of God's Word and with the help of the Holy Spirit. Everything that deviates from or conflicts with God's revealed will is identified as evil and, therefore, as dangerous. The morally maturing Christian develops a nose for sin the way a customs inspector develops a sense for smugglers. Often, even when he cannot pin it down specifically or explain it fully, he knows that something is wrong and that he must not be deceived by it or intimidated by it.

This should not take the form of a carpingly critical spirit or an arrogant, holier-than-thou attitude toward other people. Unfortunately, such characteristics are often discerned in Christians who wish to be morally earnest. These manifestations represent not improvement but distortion, a very obnoxious kind of lovelessness. One is reminded of the moral snobbishness of the Pharisees rather than the compassionate manner in which Jesus identified evil in other people.

This growing awareness of evil should not degenerate into morbid fear of evil, or obsessive preoccupation with it. What we need and will experience, as the Spirit helps us to advance, is a realistic understanding of the pervasiveness and subtlety of sin. We will also learn a very healthy respect for its power. There is no way to improve ethically or morally apart from this developing ability to recognize sin.

2. Resistance

The purpose of recognizing evil is to be in a position to resist it. Evil does not dissolve when detected. It must be actively opposed, met in combat as if it were an armed enemy attacking from without, or a saboteur trying to destroy from within. Improvement is taking place when the Christian sets himself against temptation and every evil force, when instead of collaborating with or surrendering to the enemy, he vigorously and consistently resists.

The offensive weapon in the battle is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph. 6 and Heb. 4). Confronted by evil in self and others the Christian can condemn it with God's law, forgive it with the gospel, and hold forth the promise and opportunity of superior alternatives. The defensive weapon is the shield of faith. Because the Christian believes in Christ, he is forgiven, and strong in the Spirit. This means that he can put down this evil that he has discovered. By sharing Christ with others he can bring them to faith or build them in faith so that they, too, can take a stand against the evil that is pulling at them.

B. Growth in Good

As the negative is subdued, the positive is cultivated. Progress consists not only in recognizing and removing the weeds, but

also in nurturing the good plants. As he learns to recognize and resist evil, the morally developing Christian experiences growth toward that which is good.

1. Perception

The process begins with sharpening perception. The person who is improving ethically and morally will become more clearly aware of what God's will for him really is. This will take place, not through the unfolding of an innate moral sense, but rather through rational study of the issues, responsible investigation and interpretation of biblical norms, and openness to the Spirit's guidance within. Even in difficult and ambiguous cases the Christian will be able to arrive at decisions and know which way he ought to go. His skill in reading God's intentions and expectations will be refined. He will gain confidence in his ability to tell right from wrong. He will not, however, be overconfident. While sure of his perception of what is good and right and true, he will not be cocksure.

2. Determination

If improvement is authentic, theory will be translated into practice. Determination to do this is the mark of a growing Christian. He is not content simply to know what is right and wrong. He is committed to act accordingly in his life. He is impatient with any discrepancy between principles and practice, especially in his own life. He wants to live by his ideals. This determination is more than his own will power or personal resolve. It is modification of character achieved by the Holy Spirit. It is the nature of the new person emerging and asserting himself.

3. Courage

Improvement requires and displays various kinds of courage. It involves the courage to act even when one's own feelings and other formidable pressures oppose the action. It involves courage to act even when the cost is very high. One can imagine the fear and reluctance Christians behind the Iron Curtain experience as they prepare to take a stand for their Lord. They may be afraid of the consequences to themselves and their loved ones.

Friends and family may express their anxieties and plead with them to be silent. However, growing numbers are demonstrating the courage to take a stand despite these dangers and pressures.

Another form of courage which typifies the morally maturing Christian is the courage to act even when one is not perfectly confident that the decision is correct. With experience and study we discover that many moral issues are fraught with ambiguities and uncertainties. Even after we have analyzed, consulted, studied, and prayed, there will be instances in which we are not positive what the Lord's will for us is in that situation. In such cases the Christian who is making ethical and moral progress will not be afraid to act. He will have the courage to do what appears best—because not to act is also a decision, and at times may be even more disastrous than doing something that is not clearly correct. The ground of this courage is not reckless bravado, but the realization that the Christian lives in the forgiveness of sins. He can dare to risk ethical and moral errors, not because God is unconcerned about wrongs which Christians do with good intentions, but because He pardons for the sake of Jesus Christ.

III. THE CHRISTIAN SHOULD IMPROVE

Moral improvement is a necessity as well as an opportunity. Nothing in the Bible suggests that we can safely refuse to improve. On the contrary, many passages urgently charge us to work for improvement. Paul compares the Christian's efforts to improve with those of athletes training for contests (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Elsewhere Paul calls upon Christians to strive for excellence (11 Cor. 8:7). He encourages us to "put off your old nature . . . and put on the new . . . Grow up in every way . . . into Christ" (Eph. 4:22, 24, 15). He tells Christians to "increase and abound in love," and to do more and more of the Christian obedience that they have already exhibited (1 Thess. 4).

Throughout the New Testament the Christian life is described in dynamic terms—growth, improvement, progress. Although failure and defeat are never completely eliminated as long as we are in this life, we have no reason to believe that moral stagnation or regression are acceptable and safe.

A. Reluctance to Improve

This attitude is common, even prevalent. Many Christians are amazingly comfortable with the *status quo*. Some feel that it is their privilege as Christians not to improve, that this is part of their Christian liberty. Others feel that God does not really care whether or not we improve. "I like to sin and He likes to forgive, so improvement simply is not that important," summarizes this opinion. Still others, while acknowledging that God prefers that they improve, claim that He does not actually insist on it, and that declining to improve does no serious harm. So widespread are these views and attitudes that most of us recognize them in ourselves to various degrees. We need to review the consequences of refusal or reluctance to improve.

1. *Dishonors God*

God's purposes for us, His gifts to us, His work within us are all designed to make us better people. His investment in each one of us is enormous, and He desires to restore us to His image. His Spirit is present and active within us trying to stimulate and direct this improvement. When we resist His influence and refuse to respond to His transforming efforts, He is grieved. For us to choose to remain as we are when He endows us with the potential for Christ-likeness, when we support the growth of the old person and retard that of the new, we deeply disappoint Him.

God is also dishonored by those who claim to believe in Him but give little evidence of this in their conduct. Unbelievers, especially the militant among them, are quick to notice the contrast between the professed values and actual performance of many Christians. Some who are initially attracted to Christ and His gospel are subsequently repulsed when they discover that many Christians refuse His moral influence. "If that is all the effect He has upon His people, I want no part of Him," is their conclusion.

2. *Deprives People*

The redirection of life that constitutes moral improvement is largely for the benefit of other people. When we refuse to improve we are withholding from others some of the love and help that they need, that we owe them, and that we are in a

position to give. Such refusal is in part the decision not to live for others, not to serve them, protect them, provide for them, support them, and identify with them to the extent that we could and should. It amounts to shrugging off and turning away from lonely, suffering, neglected, and condemned human beings. All of these are the losers when we refuse to improve.

3. *Threatens Self*

Ironically, the self is also harmed by its rejection of the opportunity to improve. Although the reason for refusing was to please and benefit it, the self is in fact threatened. Refusal to improve morally is refusal of God, and this is detrimental to faith. Faith is worn down and may eventually collapse in the person who consistently says no to the One who is trying to renew him. Finally he reaches the point of wondering, "How can God forgive me when I do so little in response to His love and power?" When one can no longer believe that God forgives, saving faith is gone.

Furthermore, refusal to improve invites adversity from God. He may have to take strong measures to alert us to the seriousness of our refusal. If we choose to stay with our sinful behavior patterns rather than be reformed, He may permit us to taste their bitter consequences. The person who, for example, prefers to deceive rather than to speak and act truthfully, may find himself without friends, family, and employment. By some painful experience God may try to bring him to his senses and redirect him toward improvement. Ultimately, eternal condemnation can result if, as mentioned above, faith is destroyed altogether. No one stands to lose more from a person's refusal to improve than that person himself.

B. Results of Improvement

Improvement really matters. The Christian who gratefully employs God's love and help in order to become more like Him makes a significant impact in several areas.

1. *Honors God*

When the Christian's life improves noticeably, others will wonder why and will probably ask him. This provides a superb opportunity to glorify God, to call attention to Him and His love.

Zealous Christians sometimes press others aggressively in order to try to make them accept their witness. Often this is counter-productive, because the others are not ready for a gospel testimony.

Peter makes it clear that the best preparation for witness consists of reverent and chaste behavior, patience while suffering unjustly, and other forms of Christian moral improvement. He challenges Christians to live up to their moral potential. He also commands believers to be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope within, which is the source of the change (I Peter 2). Improvement stimulates interest in the gospel. Jesus compares the good works of His followers to light which points to the Father (Matt. 5:16). God is noticed and praised as a result of our improvement.

2. *Benefits Others*

To improve ethically and morally is to become a more useful person, one who lives more fully for God and for others. Whenever a Christian helps others become more aware of God and His redemptive love he meets their most basic need. As a Christian becomes more sensitive and loving to other people, he will discover any number of new ways to encourage and heal them. The growing Christian is as creative at serving others as he is eager and sincere. One individual acting in love, developing and expressing Christian personhood, can ameliorate human misery to an astonishing degree and can initiate a chain reaction of good which spreads far and wide.

One contemporary example, which could be multiplied many times, is Mother Theresa of Calcutta. Sent as a young Roman Catholic nun to work among the people of India, she was appalled at the conditions there. Many people were dying in the streets each day alone and unattended, and many infants were abandoned by their poverty-stricken parents. Largely alone, Mother Theresa began a ministry of love and care in Christ's name to these people with whom no one else would bother. Her example and appeals generated growing interest and support. Today, after decades of Christ-like service, she has been joined by a small army of workers, and she heads a network of welfare agencies. Her purpose is to do something beautiful for God by a growing devotion to people who need it most. She has succeeded remarkably, and the same possibility faces every Christian.

3. *Fulfills and Rewards Self*

Although we do not seek to serve ourselves by moral effort and improvement, this does, in fact, occur. In order to live more fully for God and other people we must draw heavily upon His power and love. This, inevitably, is an uplifting experience in which we discover His reality and faithfulness in a meaningful, personal way.

In addition, we discover more completely who we are and what we will ultimately become. Every stage of moral improvement is a foretaste of what we will be like when our transformation is complete in the life of the world to come. Already in this life we ordinarily enjoy temporal rewards, such as health and happiness, as a result of our increased obedience. Although for their strengthening through trial God sometimes permits the righteous to suffer, He most often reveals His approval and grace by providing them with additional blessings and joys. Most surprising of all is His promise to acknowledge and commend at the Judgment all the good that we do in His name during our lifetime. Everyone benefits when we improve morally—even ourselves.

Unfortunately, we frequently confuse cause with effect, and the consequences range from amusing to lethal. The student who attributes his poor grade to the instructor's dislike for him is probably making this mistake. In all likelihood the instructor's negativism is related to the student's lack of interest. The dislike followed rather than produced the conditions reflected in the poor grade. In the area under consideration here—moral improvement—it is also very easy to confuse cause with effect, and the consequences of doing so are extremely dangerous.

We are interested in moral improvement and actively strive for it, not in order to be saved, but because we are already saved by God's grace through Christ. We are not like aspiring athletes at a tryout doing their utmost to make the team. Rather, we are like players who have already made the team, who are established and secure in their positions. They train diligently and put their all into the game because they want to measure up to the privilege and honor which is theirs. The analogy is not completely parallel, of course, for athletes make a team on the basis of their performance and prowess. We are accepted as God's

people only and completely through His mercy and generosity. However, a valid point of comparison remains. We improve, not so that we might be accepted by God, but because we already are accepted.

When we present our ethical improvement to God, it is essential that our attitude reflect a proper recognition of cause and effect. If we offer our good works to Him *as a result of the salvation* which He has graciously provided in Christ, these good works delight Him, far beyond their intrinsic worth. Even the smallest measure of improvement means a great deal to Him, if it is a response to His saving work. However, when offered up as a reason why He should forgive and save us, even the most impressive improvement will infuriate Him. He and He alone can and does save. He will not tolerate our seeking or claiming any part of the credit. Improvement is a result of salvation, *not* a cause.