

The Undifferentiated Family Ego Mass

Her greatest dream in life
 had been to get away from home,
 independent of the lives that tried to mold her:
She always wears a hat,
 because her mother never did;
She keeps her hair cut short,
 because her father liked it long;
She likes the modern poets,
 since her sister likes the classics;
She goes to church each Sunday,
 since her brother is agnostic.
Away from them at last,
 they decide her every question.

—Harry Lee Poe

HOW PEOPLE ARE THEIR OWN PROBLEM

People may have an awareness of evil and wrong and falsehood through the experience of having evil, wrong, and falsehood inflicted on them, but how do we account for those who do the inflicting? Jesus observed that we easily see the speck in someone else's eye, but we completely miss the telephone pole in our own eye (Matt. 7:3–5). Very few of us want to notice the extent to which we ourselves are the problem of evil in the world. We may manage to blame it on people, but by this judgment we mean other people. After all, we are nice. We prefer to think that those other ones are the problem. We are each the problem, however, by what we encourage and by what we avoid.

Encouraging the Negative

I just came in from a faculty dinner where we had a rather vague slice of reportedly peach pie for dessert. I ate it, of course, because I have self-discipline and can make myself eat dessert whether it is fit to eat or not. As soon as I got home, I cut a nice large brownie from the pan my daughter, Mary Ellen, had just taken out of the oven and added three scoops of ice cream to it for good measure. This time I ate it because it was good and I wanted it. I did not need it. I would do it all again for such a splendid illustration of how we are our own problem.

Food is an easy topic because the whole country is growing obese together.

It once was the odd few, but now it is a national problem. Of course, overeating is not wicked, evil, or sinful, because nice people do it. Apart from it ruining our health and hastening our death, it is hard to find anything wrong with it. We used to eat everything on our plates when I was a child so that people in China and Africa would not starve. At least, that seems to have been the logic when our parents said, "Eat your supper. Don't you know there are people starving in Africa and China?" In fact, it would seem that the American overconsumption of food is killing us as well as people in the world who could use it. Without going into the broader social implications of sin and the fact that God made a world that can feed itself if the people on it will only tend to the distribution, why do we eat more than we need?

Not everyone eats more than they need, of course. Some people have plenty of food and plenty of money to buy more, but choose to starve themselves to death instead. Sin kills quickly or slowly, but it always kills. Why do we do it to ourselves? It does not seem rational, and surely humans are rational creatures. It is possible for us to have many areas of our lives under control, while another area might be a complete mess. How does it happen? I headed straight for the brownie when I came home, but former president Bill Clinton skips the brownies because, as he explained in a recent interview, "I never liked chocolate."¹ This statement only goes to show that not all people have the same temptations.

Temptation

The very word *temptation* is a strange word the way we use it. I could say that I was tempted by the brownies. A sentence like that seems to suggest that I was the passive victim of a brownie attack. The brownies overwhelmed me by their superior numbers, and I was forced to eat them. So much for "I was tempted." The very use of the word *temptation* is an effort to place the blame for our behavior somewhere else. In accepting responsibility, we rationalize the situation in an effort to place the blame somewhere else. When I say, "I was tempted by the brownies," I mean, "I wanted the brownies." Temptation is a fancy word for desire that lets us off the hook and causes us to wonder why we have been tempted.

1. This remark appeared in a story by Martha T. Moore that appeared in *USA Today* that was picked up on the wire services as "A New Deal for Bill: Former President Writing a New Job Description from His Harlem Office," *The Jackson Sun*, February 22, 2004, F-1.

Bill Clinton is not tempted by chocolate. I am not tempted to drink alcohol. Alcoholism has run in my family since the early 1700s, as far as we can document. My great-great-grandfather warned his cousin Edgar about "the family curse." I have never had any desire to drink, so alcohol does not tempt me. I suspect I would feel differently if I ever took the first drink. Several years ago my sister, Katie, served an amaretto pound cake at Christmas, and I ate seven pieces! Even with chemical dependency like alcoholism, however, the trigger may lie in another area. I knew a girl in junior high school who was already a hopeless alcoholic at fifteen. She said that she had not liked the taste of alcohol, so she had to make herself drink for the longest time until she got used to it. Her desire had not been for alcohol, but for acceptance by her group. She was very popular.

Temptation seems to involve the desire for a good thing, but in a wrong way. Even something like a heroin addiction begins with a desire to feel good rather than a desire to become enslaved to a substance that destroys and kills. The sexual exploitation of children by adults begins with a desire for sexual gratification that God invented but which people can twist and distort into something vile and putrid. We can desire the well-being of our country until we have corrupted this concern into a paranoid view of people who are different. Temptation involves a desire that results in corruption, damage, defilement, or in some way injury to something that is good.

We may easily say that we would never knowingly hurt anyone, and thereby we excuse ourselves from the fallout when our actions cause injury to others. It may be more accurate to say that we do not care whether we hurt anyone or not, just so long as we get what we want. A more charitable way to state it would be that it never occurred to us that we might hurt someone else. In some cases we do not know why anyone would be hurt, thereby placing the blame on the injured party with the now famous refrain of the younger generation: "Get over it!"

Why would sane people nurture desires that corrupt what is good? Why would sane people nurture desires that injure themselves? In the first place, we do not believe that any harm will come. In the second place, we are curious to see what will happen or what it feels like. This character trait is the fundamental flaw with the theory of punishment as a deterrent to crime. During my eight years as a prison chaplain, I never met a man who thought he would get caught. Punishment had no deterrent value for them, because they did not believe that they would ever suffer any consequences for their

action. In this regard, there is no difference between people on the street and people behind bars. To fear punishment, it is first necessary to believe that ideas and actions have consequences.

To a certain degree, the prohibition provides the thrill that makes the temptation attractive. It would be a neutral act except that it involves *defiance*. The rush that comes from doing something wrong and getting away with it adds the dimension of competition and rivalry. Additional incentive to follow our temptations comes simply by the addition of stubbornness. Something we are indifferent to becomes a matter of great determination from sheer stubbornness, one of the more useful applications of pridefulness. We cut off our noses to spite our faces. This tendency suggests that something more than natural selection must be at work to have brought the human race this far. Left to our own devices, we self-destruct. We do not act in our own best interests, much less the best interests of the world at large, as Sydney Greenstreet explained to Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*: “In the heat of action, men are likely to forget where their best interests lie and let their emotions carry them away.”²

Desire

Desire by itself is not bad. It is a good gift from God that serves to preserve life and indicate the right path. The problem comes when we pervert desire. Thirst and hunger are examples of good desires. Without them, the human body would not know to nourish itself. To desire more food once the need for food has been met, however, illustrates how desire may be perverted. The irony comes when we know we are eating more than we need, but keep eating anyway. We even comment on the fact, and keep eating anyway. We observe that we will regret it later, but keep eating anyway. We laugh and point out the absurdity of it, but keep eating anyway. Sometimes, however, we stop when we want to eat more. Amazingly, it requires an enormous exercise of restraint to stop eating. We look longingly at the food, but we stop. In both situations, we have an internal conflict with ourselves. We feel torn between two options. Why do we feel torn?

In the old Walt Disney cartoons, Goofy and Donald Duck found themselves in personal conflict over temptations. In the cartoons, two opposing

2. *The Maltese Falcon*, Warner Brothers Pictures 1941. Hal B. Wallis, executive producer; John Huston, director. Based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett.

miniature characters appeared on the shoulders of Goofy and Donald Duck to advise them on what to do. On one side stood a small devil with horns, tail, and red suit that looked like Goofy or Donald. On the other shoulder stood a miniature angel with white robe and halo that looked like Goofy or Donald. This image of independent forces battling with each other comes from the Middle Ages, when poets described the internal struggles of a person in terms of embodied emotions.³ Reason was one character and Passion was another. In the case of Goofy and Donald, Virtue is represented as an angel and Vice is represented as a devil. Unfortunately, this deep cultural image leaves the impression that the internal dimension of a person can be divided up into neat little sections where one part of us is “good” and another part of us is “bad.” In fact, it is all mingled together. Every dimension of us is made in the image of God but has fallen short of the glory of God. We all live out the splendor and the tragedy of Creation. Reason, desire, emotion, passion, discipline, character, and so many other elements of the internal life do not exist as independent entities like the liver and the kidneys. Rather, they are all intimately and indivisibly aspects of the human spirit. People who make a complete separation between their “good” self and their “bad” self have only succeeded in deluding themselves. Part of the problem comes from a modern confusion over the idea of the “self.”

Some religions completely reject the idea of independent selves. Most strands of Buddhism deny the existence of the independent self. Some forms of Hinduism would follow the same view. The biblical view is quite different. Making allowance for the changes in language from ancient Hebrew to Greek to modern English, what modern people call the “self” is what the ancient Hebrews would call the “soul.” The soul is the totality of a person including the interior spiritual dimension and the exterior physical dimension. The soul is a seamless totality of body and spirit. My interior spiritual dimension affects how my body feels. If I take care of my body, it can boost my spirit. If I abuse my body, it can dampen my spirit. Desire arises in the body as a good feature of physical life. It remains for the spirit, however, to control the desires of the body. If the spirit has fallen short of the glory of God, however, it no longer has the kind of relationship with the body with which it belongs. The soul is not at peace. The soul is torn.

We can see this principle of unlikely parts forming a single whole at different levels of the world. Different elements that come together in

3. See C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 44–111.

harmony may form a new compound or molecule. The combination is vastly different from its individual parts. We may state the idea philosophically: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The biblical concept of marriage represents the same principle. The two become one. In some religious traditions, the husband and wife remain in a hierarchical relationship, but the biblical principle taught in Genesis and reaffirmed by Jesus is that the two become one flesh (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5). Marriage is more than two people. It becomes a new and unique reality. This principle also operates at the large social level. The New Testament describes the social relationship of the church as “the body of Christ” and each believer belongs to the church as the “members” do to a body (1 Cor. 12:12–31). Elements and molecules seem to behave in a consistent, predictable manner, but the same cannot be said for humans within themselves or within their social relationships. Chemistry and physics have been quite successful at explaining why things happen the way they do in the physical world, but the social sciences have a pretty miserable track record making sense of human behavior. The soul is not at peace with itself or other people, because it is not at peace with God.

It is actually a sad situation. Even those who recognize the problem are doomed to failure if they try to do anything about it because whatever they attempt is equally affected by the problem. Some religious systems place their hope in human effort to rise above the human dilemma. Through discipline, meditation, obedience to instruction, ritual, philosophical speculation, or the sheer effort to merge with God, different religious traditions try to deal with the fundamental crisis of the failure of human nature. The Bible does not speak of the problem as a problem with human nature, because the human nature created by God is made good. The problem with people is that they do not experience the human nature that God intended for them to have. They experience what the Bible refers to as “the sinful nature.” The solution to the problem lies in the active presence of God who transforms the sinful nature into the human nature found in Christ Jesus. The apostle Paul described the dilemma and its solution this way:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. (Gal. 5:16–17)

What does it mean to “live by the Spirit,” if that is the way to avoid gratifying “the desires of the sinful nature”? In this context, Paul referred to the Holy Spirit.

To “live by the Spirit” means several things. For one thing, it means to base one’s existence in a dependent relationship upon the Spirit of God. We can take life for granted, as most people do, or we can view life as a gift that God gives fresh each day. The recognition of dependence upon God gives a person a perspective for living that grows out of gratitude. For another thing, to “live by the Spirit” means to seek the guidance of God in all things, both great and small. Many people want God’s help in the great, weighty matters of life, but they prefer to handle the small things themselves. The rationale is that they do not want to “bother” God with little things. As a result, we get in the habit of managing our lives without any thought that God might give us guidance that would be quite valuable. When we are not sensitive to the Spirit’s guidance in small things, how can we ever hope to understand God’s guidance when the major problems, challenges, and opportunities of life come along? To “live by the Spirit” means quite literally to derive one’s new life from the Holy Spirit. Like bacteria or fungus that requires some host to survive, humans need a source for life. Jesus said that he was the source of life and that the Holy Spirit brings that life into a person (John 3:5–15; 4:13–14; 7:37–39; 14:15–20). Since Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is life itself, whoever has the Son has life (1 John 5:11–12).

Freedom from the desires of the sinful nature comes in having a more powerful alternative and in having a nature that the Spirit of God has transformed so that it can respond to that more powerful alternative. Someone once defined insanity as “doing the same old thing the same old way and expecting a different result.” The idea of trying to overcome the power and effect of sin with the same resources we have always had is insane. In order to withstand the desires of the sinful nature, we need a resource beyond our natural equipment. The Holy Spirit is the one who enables people to rise above their condition. In this way, a person may “live by the Spirit” and “not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

James, the half-brother of Jesus, described the relation of temptation and sin in this way:

but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth

to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:14–15)

James describes desire, sin, and death allegorically as though they were persons in the life cycle of procreation, but through seduction or possibly even rape. To be “dragged away” suggests rape, though “enticed” suggests seduction. In either event, under the influence of evil, human desire produces sin. All of this struggle occurs within a person. Temptation is essentially a spiritual struggle against the power of evil.

Evil does not have self-existence like God. It is not an equal and opposite force like the yin and yang of Tao. It does not have a dualistic relationship with goodness like the religion of Zoroastrianism from ancient Persia. Yet, evil does have a personal expression. It is not a personal power like or equal to God, but it is a personal spiritual manifestation. The Bible speaks of spiritual beings who rebelled against God. Few details are given. The archangel who inspired rebellion is known to us as Satan or the Devil. Left to themselves, in a single lifetime people can fester in their sinfulness until they grow into misshapen fragments of the image of God. Imagine what would happen to a person who withdrew from God, not merely for one lifetime, but for dozens of lifetimes. Imagine what that person would be like after a thousand lifetimes. Now, imagine a being created outside of time and space who has been falling from the glory of God in immeasurable increments. Such is Satan and his host. A created being who is not all powerful, all present, or all knowing, Satan seems to make up for his limitations of nature by his abilities as an administrator. The consummate bureaucrat, Satan has a host of compatriots. The great power of Satan is hatred and deception. With these two tools, he manages to keep the human race in a constant stir. The spiritual wickedness that has festered in the demonic since primordial time seduces, entices, and deceives. People gladly believe the lie because it exalts them for the time being. On the other hand, Christ Jesus offers love and truth as the power that overcomes the tools of Satan.

Paul describes the spiritual struggle as one that can involve more than just our own evil desires. The struggle can take on cosmic proportions for some. Such a struggle feels like warfare, but the victory does not lie in our own natural resources. The victory belongs to the power of Jesus Christ for whom evil is no match:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. (Eph. 6:10–18)

In allegorical form, Paul enumerates the resources for successfully resisting the onslaught of evil, as though truth, righteousness, peace, and faith are defensive armor and the word of God is a decisive weapon against evil.

Avoiding the Positive

As bad as encouraging the negative may be, avoiding the positive is worse. If we do not have the internal resources to overcome the evil impulses of our nature, then we must find the resources somewhere else that will deal with the problem of sin in our lives. Jesus is the source who solves the problem of evil. Just as evil has a personal dimension, the antidote to evil is personal. Unfortunately, the personal dimension of evil also involves the choice to withdraw from God.

Communication

We encourage our own sinfulness by avoiding communication from God. One of the characteristic features of a self-conscious, personal God is the ability to communicate. Communication lies at the heart of interpersonal relationships, and another feature of the triune God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the relational nature of God. The Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit share the same nature and exist eternally in indivisible relationship with one another. The perfection of this unity includes perfection of communication. The old theological term is *communion*.

As creatures made in the image of God, we have the ability to communicate, but we experience communication as a flawed possibility. We miscommunicate and we misinterpret communication from others. Living apart from communion with God, people avoid God's initiatives at communication. Our failure to communicate with God mirrors our failure to communicate with other people. The failure to communicate rests in the self-centeredness, sinful desires, and self-interest that motivate people at some level. We experience the distortion and perversion of communication within the workplace. Consider these situations.

A determined outside vendor receives your rejection letter. Not wanting to take "no" for an answer, the salesman calls you. He says that at first he thought you did not want to do business, but on reflection he realized that you must have meant something else. In this case, language becomes a manipulative tool for getting one's way. Its utility lies not in expressing ideas and truth, but in exercising power and defeating someone else.

A colleague has an agenda to "get" someone else in the organization. The colleague comes by your office to give you the benefit of her wisdom about the inadequacies of her rival. After leaving you, this aggressive colleague quotes you all over the office as being the one who has an objection to the other worker. Communication does not function as a means of expressing reality or truth. Rather it is a means to deceive and injure.

The leader of an organization has made a series of bad decisions that have injured the organization and weakened its ability to function. The leader begins to interpret the facts of the situation in such a way that a false impression of success and prosperity results that does not correspond to the actual situation. The "spin" is a lie. In this case, communication is a tool for intentionally misleading people.

A stubborn colleague in another department has made up his mind that he wants to do something that is technologically impossible due to the software package that operates the organization's computer system. As you explain the situation, he continually says, "I understand," and then goes to the boss because you will not cooperate with his department. In this case, communication involves the deliberate decision, driven by stubbornness, not to understand. The desire to have one's way supersedes understanding.

The chair of another committee in your organization makes plans for a major event that involves you without determining if your calendar will permit your participation. She waits until the last minute to mention it to you and then is extremely upset that you will not be there. In this case communication is a dictatorial matter in which others are expected to conform to the will of the one who operates independently of everyone else. She does not listen, and she expects life to go her way.

A colleague agrees to a course of action after a long discussion period that involves a major study, months of meetings, and careful negotiation between departments. Once the decision has been made, he goes behind your back to the head of the organization to have the decision overturned because he did not like the outcome. This person uses the language of making agreements, but does not honor them. Words are hollow and have no meaning. His "yes" means "no" and his "no" means "yes." He uses words to lie and advance his own dishonesty.

You brought a colleague into a project who promised to take care of several important matters for you so that your work could be completed on time. The deadline arrived and the colleague had not done what she promised. She gave several feeble excuses, and then began to act as though she had been mistreated by you. Now she avoids you. This person uses communication as a way to deal with her incompetence. Her body language also communicates a sense of guilt and shame that results in alienation and separation.

We could easily carry this discussion into family relationships, politics, advertising, sports, private clubs, and any other sphere of human relationships to see that humans have a dreadfully flawed practice of communication that falls far short of the glory of God. The problem of communication demonstrates the way that sin affects the everyday existence of people and the way that we reinforce our negative tendencies while avoiding what would benefit us in a positive way. If humans have this problem on a continuing daily basis with one another, why would our attempts at communication with God be any different?

Communication with God goes in both directions. God has taken the initiative in communication with people for as long as there have been people. God communicates in some way with all of creation. Humans have the ability, however, to communicate with God on a cognitive basis. This communication involves more than feelings. It involves understanding,

character, knowledge, and ideas. God communicates with people in different ways. We have already explored the idea of spiritual experiences like conviction of sin and Rudolph Otto's description of the universal awareness of spiritual experience.

The Written Word

God communicates in more substantive ways than these casual encounters. The book of Hebrews begins with the statement:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (1:1-3)

God's revelation has come in many ways, from visions to voices to events. God's revelation takes the form of history, poetry, law, and fiction. Ultimately, God revealed himself by entering into the world and living out a human life from birth to death. One of the primary functions of communication is to provide a basis for trust or faith. God does things to give people a reason to trust him. In establishing the reliability of the Bible, God revealed to the prophets what he was going to do in the affairs of the people of Israel. When the words of the prophets came to pass, the revelation from God was recognized as legitimate. By living out a human life, God demonstrated why his written word can be trusted.

It is relatively easy for people to believe that some kind of God exists. That is not the problem with the human race. The problem lies in trusting the God who exists. It is not so much a matter of believing that God exists as it is a problem of believing God. In the story of the exodus from Egypt, Pharaoh believed God existed. He just did not believe what God said. He did not believe that God could make good on his threats. The more Moses told Pharaoh about God and what God said, the more determined Pharaoh was to resist the message. Some people refuse to hear God speak through his messengers or through the Bible. They hear what they want to hear. They are much more comfortable with a God who has no expectations.

They prefer to have no standards other than the ones they create in their minds or participate in as a part of their culture.

It is possible to be very religious and invoke the name of God and the figure of Christ while withdrawing from God. This possibility arises because of the profound human creativity to pervert the revelation of God. The greatest evil in society occurs when people withdraw from the light of God but retain the forms of religion. Religion provides a huge self-authenticating power that can justify any selfish action. Religion need not have anything to do with God apart from the grammatical construction of sentences and the use of vocabulary that would suggest a vague concept of something bigger and more powerful than a person. Hitler began the Nazi movement with a rejection of the God of the Bible who loved Jews and actually became a Jew on earth. He retained religion, but he reworked it to conform to his ideal of the master Aryan race. He revived the pagan Germanic myths. He could succeed because Germany had already withdrawn from God. Germany had embraced the Enlightenment understanding of God. The religious intelligentsia who trained the clergy for over a hundred years before Hitler retained the religious institutions but without faith that God had made himself known either through the prophets or through Jesus Christ. The Bible was merely a cultural document of people who expressed their nationalistic ambitions through their war God. Once people have abandoned the light of the gospel, they are ripe for the distortions of darkness.

Throughout the Bible, we find a series of ways in which people have distorted the revelation of God or discounted it. In the story of the temptation of Eve, the serpent asks if God had forbidden the humans to eat from the trees in the garden to which the woman replied, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die'" (Gen. 3:2b-3). In this story, the woman distorts the communication from God. She has made it stronger, harsher, more legalistic. She has added that they must not touch the fruit. God never said not to touch it (Gen. 2:16-17). It is possible to believe strongly, even legalistically, in the Bible as the word of God and to depart from God by distorting what the Bible actually says. Thus, even the understanding of the Bible requires the help of God.

Prayer

God also communicates with people through prayer. One of the greatest human desires is immediate access to God. People want the veil removed between us and whatever or whomever lies out there somewhere. Every religion has its approach to gaining access to understanding of the spiritual domain. Tarot cards and crystals, tea leaves and Ouija boards, séances and channeling are practices that people have developed in the desperate effort to make contact with the world beyond physical experience. Many religions believe in some form of prayer. Jesus taught that prayer is like a conversation between a child and a parent. He taught his followers to use the Aramaic word for "Daddy" when speaking to God. We distance ourselves from God, however, when prayer only means telling God what we want or when we only speak to God with rigid, cold formality. Thus, we can go through the motions of prayer and still distance ourselves from God.

Some people say that they do not like to bother God with little things, preferring to bring to God only the major disasters when they come along. This is like teenagers who never speak to their parents until they need something. Parents like to hear from their children. They like to hear about all the little details of each day. Tiny children talk to their parents about the things that make them happy and the things that make them sad. Very small children are happy to have the attention of their parents. Only as they grow older do we teach them to be entranced with the toys of life. Jesus said people must become like little children to enter the kingdom of God. The attitude of little children is the attitude necessary to pray. It involves desire to be with God and share the details of the day. When I was a small child visiting my grandmother, she used to take me out on the porch where we would sit for hours and talk. It was not important talk as the world counts importance, but it was important to my grandmother. This valuing of small talk by God is the essence of prayer. It is a matter of spending time together.

Prayer seems quite strange and difficult for many people. As a result, many people avoid prayer. The strangeness of it is like trying to have a conversation with someone we do not know. Even worse, it is like trying to converse with someone who speaks a different language. It is like running into someone we knew in high school but have not seen in years. We exchange pleasantries and then have nothing more to say. We have nothing in common. In order to talk, we have to spend time together on a regular ba-

sis. Many people feel uncomfortable praying. They feel awkward. It is not the awkwardness of talking to ourselves. We do that easily enough. It is more the awkwardness teenagers feel in trying to talk with a member of the opposite sex when they do not know what to say or what the other one thinks of them. Some teenagers avoid the opposite sex altogether in order to avoid the feelings of inadequacy. People experience the same thing in prayer until they discover that the one they have trouble talking to loves them.

The Living Word

Just as we can avoid God through the means of communication he has made available to us, we can avoid having a personal relationship with God. God entered the world through Jesus Christ in order to bring the world back to him and to free people from the captivity and death of sin. God not only revealed his will, he revealed himself. Yet, we can avoid God by avoiding Jesus. The Gospels portray how this happened during the life of Jesus on earth, and we still reenact the same story.

Peter probably is the most well-known of the disciples of Jesus. We find so many references to Peter throughout the Gospels. Why this focus on Peter and not on the other disciples? There is a lot about Peter with which we can all identify. Peter is very helpful for me as I go through this process of considering the whole idea of sin and how we explain the concept of sin to a postmodern generation for which theological categories are just completely meaningless and without content. Peter helps me see myself a little more clearly. Consider an early experience of Peter with Jesus (Luke 5:4–9). He is doing what fishermen do: he is taking care of the business of fishing. The fishermen had been out all night. They were on shore, cleaning their nets and straightening them out so they could go out the next day. It was part of doing business, the part you have to take care of. It is not the fun part of fishing, but it is the part that has to be taken care of. On a bad day, if you do not catch any fish you do not eat. If you do not catch any fish, then you cannot turn the fish into money. A bad day is a day in which we are preoccupied with the cares of life, and yet there is in the background of this story a general awareness of God.

Atheism is not the problem with the human race. People everywhere have a general awareness of God. The apostle Paul tells us in the first chapter

of Romans that atheism is not the problem. The problem is a general ingratitude, that accompanies the general awareness of the existence of God (Rom. 1:21). Peter had in his day what we call in this day a “natural theology.” Natural theology does not pay attention to revelation from God, but relies upon the imagination to conceive of God. Natural theology allows us to say, “I can worship God as well on the lake as I can at that church.” We see this run-of-the-mill theology where there is no particular content to our concept of God, but the acknowledgment that some kind of god is there. This attitude is not unlike the watchmaker god of the eighteenth century: the idea that the universe is a marvelous place made by a god that set it in motion and then went off and did something else. Such a god is not really involved in this world. He is not involved in our lives. He is a god that is distant and removed, whom you can talk about pleasantly, but that you do not have to worry about meddling in your life.

In this fishing episode, Peter gives a tacit acknowledgment to Jesus as having some sort of status. He calls him master. He certainly does not identify him with God. He certainly gives no hint that he believes Jesus is divine or that he is the incarnate son of God. We often read faith into the story in retrospect. We know how the story ends. How would we have responded to Jesus if we had been there at that particular time? Would we have said like the rest that he is a good preacher? Perhaps he is one of the prophets. He stands aside from the rest, so Peter gave him a certain amount of respect. Besides, there were all those customers watching. With all the customers watching, what is Peter to do when Jesus asks him to go back out on the lake? Can he say, “Drop dead,” “Mind your own business,” “Stick it in your ear,” or is he going to play to the crowd and say, “Sure, one more time around the block”? I do not know. I do not know what is going on in Peter’s mind. I do not know why he addressed Jesus as master when he spent his time washing nets. Apparently, he heard the teaching. There is no voluntary response to Jesus, but Jesus takes a certain initiative with Peter.

The story illustrates the problem of how to respond when God finally shows himself and the thorny problem of recognizing that God has shown himself. How do you respond when God shows himself? Do you hope he will stay hidden? Moses wanted God to show himself, and John began his gospel by telling us that God did finally show himself and “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father” (1:14). So how do you know God has shown himself, when Jesus looked like everyone

else? Generally, we do not expect an encounter with God at our place of work. We do not expect an encounter with God in the everyday normal spheres of life. The encounter with God is for Sunday morning. It is for the retreat. It is for the Bible conference. It is for the special time on the calendar that we have set aside for encounters with God. So we set ourselves up, intently expecting *not* to meet God. Our general awareness of God is almost our protection to make sure we do not have to deal with him.

What was Peter's concern that day? We have the tendency to read ourselves into the Bible, but with Peter there is a preoccupation with the burdening care of the world. Anyone who had any investments in the stock market between 2001 and 2003 may have thought about the stock market from time to time while it took its cheery little roller-coaster ride. There are all sorts of cares of the world that can preoccupy our minds. Work is a logical one. There is always someone at work to annoy us, who may be after our job. The workplace often has employees who do not perform the way they are supposed to perform, and we have to supervise their performance or clean up after them. Perhaps sales are down. There is always something about work that is toil and sweat, no matter how well air-conditioned the office may be. Our families always provide some kind of preoccupation, whether our families are doing well or doing poorly. Some parents struggle with whether or not their children should go to Harvard and study medicine or go to Yale and study law. We may be preoccupied with what our children are going to do with their lives or what our parents are going to do in their old age. There are always things to preoccupy us, including our own status. Status involves more than mere income. I was intrigued to learn while serving as a prison chaplain that even prisoners have a status system. The aristocrats are the con artists who can trick you out of your money without the need of a gun. You just give it to them. A little lower down the social scale are the armed robbers, then the petty thieves. Murderers do not even count because they are more or less accidentally there, having committed their crime in the passion of the moment. At the bottom of the social scale are the sex offenders and child molesters. Status matters to people, and many people devote their lives to it.

Here is Peter, while the teaching is going on, preoccupied with his work. Why not? No one else is going to wash those nets, but in so doing he ignores the God who is already there. He ignores the gift of God. He ignores the present grace of God that does not come along every day, not like that. In

another sense, the grace of God does come along every single day, and somehow we manage not to notice it. We learn to pray, "give us this day our daily bread," and God does, but how many of us really notice three meals a day as a gracious and an extraordinary experience? We take a lot for granted in our preoccupations.

This episode is not unlike the experience of Jonah. Jonah had a job to do and he wanted to do it, but his concept of the job was different from God's concept of the job. Once he was in Nineveh, doing his job, he was not preoccupied with the outcome for the people of Nineveh. He was preoccupied with a plant that had grown up to give him shade, but just as quickly, had died. Jonah was preoccupied with a plant and angry and upset. God asked him the haunting question, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" (Jon. 4:9). We can become so preoccupied with very small things that they totally distort our lives, our response to other people, our well-being, our health, our frame of mind, and our outlook. We have an expectation of how things should go for us. Is our preoccupation justified? The more preoccupied we are with something, the more out of balance we become in the rest of our lives. In our preoccupations we can focus on one aspect of truth to the extent that we forget the rest. It happens easily and gradually, not as a deliberate effort. It comes so easily as a part of human nature. The maxim holds true that when you are up to your waist in alligators it is hard to remember that the goal was to drain the swamp. It is the alligators of life that preoccupy us and narrow our focus.

So what becomes of Peter? He has a willingness to row out into the lake. Jesus tells him to go out one more time, do a little fishing, and see what happens. He does. Perhaps he acts from faith, or perhaps this is the mustard seed of faith. The story ends with an incredible catch. For a true fisherman, this experience would cause a problem. This is one of those catches that no one will ever believe. Experiences like this give fishermen a bad reputation for telling lies. The catch is so large that the boat is almost swamped. I have been in a sailboat when it was almost swamped. It is a little bit frightening when you tilt to the side and the water comes rushing in before you are righted again.

At this point, Peter has that bona fide experience with God, the one in which he becomes aware of himself in a way that he had not consciously been aware of himself before. In the midst of this experience, he says, "I am a sinner." Is there a certain rule that he has broken? It is a different sort of

response from that of the rich young man who said that he had never broken a law in his entire life (Mark 10:17–20). As a legalist, he did not see himself as a sinner. What do you do if you do not have a miracle? I have seen the miraculous happen in other people's lives, but God does not give this kind of experience to us every single day, does he?

I consider myself to be a great obstacle between me and God. I consider people to be their own great obstacle between them and God. Theologians have tried to narrow down the problem of the human race to the one final category. Some say pride, sex, the love of money, or something else. We are all different, every single one of us. We are different and we are all our own obstacle to the Lord who is right there, every moment, every day. We are our own obstacle to one who is constantly saying, "Follow me." He told the Gadarene demoniac to stay right there in town and not to go off on the mission trip with the others (Mark 5:18–20). The woman of Samaria went back to her town (John 4:28). Jesus wanted them to stay right where they were and live out their lives. Following the Lord Jesus Christ means living out our lives exactly where we are, only with the awareness of his presence, day by day, every day. With this attitude, day by day, every day, we taste more of the flavor of our daily bread, and day by day, every day, with thanksgiving we receive the grace that is scattered all around us.

Conclusion

We can either focus our attention on Christ, or we can focus our attention on the preoccupations. Focused on the preoccupations, we are pretty much powerless to deal with them in a victorious way. Victory over the negative aspects of our lives that tend to shift our attention away from God does not come through trying to defeat the negative forces. Our mind, will, character, and emotions are all intertwined and equally affected by our flaws. Thus, we cannot defeat the negative dimension of our lives because it does not exist separately from us. Preoccupied with our sinful desires or the offenses others have committed against us, we fill our lives with darkness. On the other hand, we can meditate on the Lord Jesus Christ who fills our lives with light and banishes the darkness. Focused on Christ we have the power of the resurrection at work in our lives to deal with any disaster that may come along.