

September 4, 1966
I Corinthians 3:9-23
Norman S. Ream

THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

"Each man's work will one day be shown for what it is."
I Corinthians 3:13

It is obvious to all that during the last 50 years man has gained a great deal of understanding and control over his environment. He can seed a cloud with iodine crystals and make it rain. He can set off a hydrogen bomb and make the earth uninhabitable. He is probably well on the way to producing vast quantities of fresh water through the desalinization of sea water, the consequence of which may well be that barren deserts shall blossom and bloom. With new forms of energy, there may be enough power available to heat or to cool our entire living space so that we may always enjoy a comfortable 70 degree temperature.

Man is not, however, quite the master of his environment as he may sometimes think. When he sends an astronaut into the stratosphere the earth's environment must be sent along, for man cannot exist without it. He is and will always remain a slave to the air he breathes, to a very limited temperature variation, and to the food and water he must consume in order to exist at all.

More than that, however, there is another part of nature which man has scarcely begun to master. As C. S. Lewis has put it, "Human nature will be the last part of nature to surrender to man."

It will not do for ~~us~~ ^{us} to forget that man is basically an animal subject to the same kind of drives and urges as the so-called lower animals--the sex drive, the drive for power and recognition, as examples. Moreover, when these drives are frustrated man often acts like a lower animal. We see it most clearly in mob action and mass behavior situations wherein men will do and say things they would never do and say as isolated individuals.

No, the attitude which best befits the human being is not pride over his accomplishments but humility in the face of his failures. Man has been far from successful in controlling his own human nature. The evidence is everywhere to be seen. It is revealed in the widespread violence and crime that exists in our day. It is to be seen in the senseless slaughter of 8 nurses in Chicago, in the destruction of 15 innocent people in Texas, in the riots and looting that are becoming almost common-place in our large cities, in the increases in mental sickness, divorce, juvenile delinquency and alcoholism. Sometimes it seems as if man could control everything, save himself.

The animal nature of man is also revealed in his tendency to act precipitously rather than to think. Man has evolved a brain capable of thinking but he often succumbs to the animal urge and acts before he thinks. He is often bound by prejudice and self-concern which limit the choices he could conceivably make.

This, then, is part of the strange nature of human nature and C. S. Lewis is undoubtedly right, "Human nature will be the last part of nature to surrender to man." It is easy, therefore, for one to get discouraged and disillusioned concerning man. It was reported to me the other day that one of the policemen assigned to control the crowd which has been gathering around the pickets in our community, stated that he had lost all faith in human nature as a result of his experience. That is an attitude we may often have until we one day witness a heroic deed or a great human accomplishment and have our faith restored.

II

Now why is human nature so stubborn and so intractable? Why are we all so much like the man who insisted that he was open minded and fair, and then concluded, "I am willing to be convinced, but I would like to see the man who could convince me." As someone has put it:

A man convinced against his will
Is of the same opinion still.

Why do human beings make the same mistakes generation after generation? Why do they so often insist on acting according to their lower nature, rather than as the sons of God?

Is it not, in part at least, because they rebel at the discipline God has ordained they must live under? They so often want to be equal with God, doing what they very well please, and never suffering any consequences. Is it not because they are shortsighted and self-centered, each one thinking that he is in a class by himself--this action may not be good for others, to be sure, but it is all right for me because I'm different, I can get away with it.

But we never get away with anything. Longfellow borrowed it from others who said it long ago, and it has been repeated so often it is almost trite, but it is nevertheless a universal reality:

"Though the mills of God grind slowly
Yet they grind exceeding small;
Though with patience He stands waiting,
With exactness grinds He all."

Most men are unconscious of the stream of history. We are slow learners. God, throughout history, has continually revealed to man the rules by which he must live if he would live peacefully and happily. They are basically the same in every religious philosophy. The ancient Egyptians, the ancient Jews, the Babylonians and Hindus, all discovered and taught that murder, and slander, and hate, and theft were incompatible with the higher values man was continually seeking. They recorded the misery and the suffering that followed in the wake of such immorality.

Jesus summed it all up in the two Commandments; Love God and thy neighbor as thyself. "Do this," said Christ, "and all men shall benefit. Fail to do it, and all men shall suffer."

We have not seen much love and understanding exhibited in our community during the past two weeks. Those who invade our community, knowing full well that they will arouse animosity and may well create a situation dangerous to life and property, are not acting out of love and respect for others. Those who gather as spectators, jeer, hurl invectives, and wave confederate flags, are not acting out of love and respect for others. Those who discriminate against any person solely because of his race or color are not acting with love and respect for others. The consequences of such loveless action, we may be certain, will be evil. The universal moral law decrees it.

III

I am not trying to pass the blame to anyone else but I do believe our permissive educational philosophy has failed to measure up to that which could reasonably be expected of it. I speak not only of public education. What I am about to say applies equally to family education and parental responsibility as well as to the religious education programs offered by our churches.

I would base my conviction on Aristotle's statement made over 2000 years ago in his Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle insisted at that time that the aim of education was to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought.

Now if there are any eternal truths in the universe, these are what pupils should be made to like and they should be made to like them on the basis that the alternative is suffering and death. Thousands of years of human experience can testify to that conclusion.

But this is a far cry from the educational philosophy that asks the pupil what he would like and then tries to give it to him, or the philosophy that we ought never be dogmatic about anything, but just pool our ignorance in a discussion group with a professor as moderator.

That person who does not yet know that there are moral imperatives in the universe is so ignorant of history that he has no business teaching children and youth. Those who stand outside all judgment of value have no basis for choices save their own emotional impulses, and our children do not need to learn more about someone else's emotional impulses, they have enough of their own.

IV

I talked with a retired educator the other day and he told me that he had examined the McGuffey Readers, which some of you may have grown up with, and concluded that they were terrible. I have a strong feeling, however, that he examined them only as literature, and of course communication does change through the years. But McGuffey Readers did more than teach reading, they sought to give the student an insight into the eternal validities we have been talking about this morning. Certainly from this point of view, they have contributed far more to the general welfare of mankind than the anemic Dick and Jane stories.

On this Labor Day Sunday it would perhaps not be inappropriate to share one of the McGuffey stories with you, the story of a boy named Jack who was in love with the miller's daughter. He starts out to win his fortune in seven days. "What I want," he says, "is something for nothing." As he goes on his way, he encounters a stalled donkey and its owner. He whispers in the donkey's ear, and it responds. As a reward, the owner gives Jack three nuts. Jack is sure the nuts will help him obtain something for nothing. But they prove to be worthless.

Jack then comes upon an old woman with an apple cart eating her lunch. He sits down and helps himself to an apple. The good natured peddler doesn't mind, but in payment for the apple she asks Jack if he will tighten her horse's harness. Jack laughs. "But it is something for nothing that I am searching for, old mother," he tells her, "and now your apple is gone." "I'll give you something for nothing," cries the angry old woman, and she boxes him soundly on the ears.

Jack next encounters an old man who is playing a fiddle. He asks the fiddler about the beautiful miller's daughter. The old man asks, "Won't she marry you, a fine bright lad like you?" "She will marry me only when I roll up my sleeves and go to work", says Jack, "but that I will not do, for I have no mind to work, not when I can always get something for nothing." The old fiddler says to Jack, "I think I am exactly what you are looking for. Folks say I have finger magic with my needle, for I am a tailor. I stitch forenoon and afternoon, and then at noon and at night I fiddle." "You work!", cries Jack. "And play", says the fiddler, and he plays and sings the following tune:

There's always magic in 3 and in 7;
But I know a secret--there's magic in 10.
Just look at your fingers, you'll see magic in them;
There's magic in your fingers when you know how and when.
Your fortune is at your fingertips, so make it,
You eat your cake after you bake it.

Jack turns home. Finally the message of the fiddler breaks into his mind. The beautiful miller's daughter meets him at the mill. "Does your father's mill need a bright young lad, I wonder?" asks Jack. "If it is you," answers the girl. "Here is my fortune, then," says Jack, "right here." And he holds out his hands to her. "From now on they will work."

Perhaps not a piece of great literature, but it teaches one of the eternal truths that all children, all young people and all adults need to know. If we are ever to change human nature, we must change it on the basis of these eternal truths. We must live by them, or we will break and destroy ourselves against them.