

“Mail Call at Colossae: On our Nature” (fn.:COL 3 1-4.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-4

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Colossians 3:1-4: *So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, <sup>3</sup> for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.*

In one of my favorite movies, *The African Queen*, Charlie Allnut is the operator of a small steam boat on an African river at the time of World War I. As war conflicts break out there, Charlie Allnut rescues the spinster sister of an Anglican missionary, Rose Sayer. And the two of them are alone on the steamboat in the jungle. Charlie is a coarse, chain-smoking, heavy drinker. Rose is prim, proper, and goes by all the rules. And, of course, they fall in love. However, at one point, Charlie over-indulges in gin. Charlie, in a hung-over state, squabbles with Rose, but she gives Charlie the “silent treatment”—ignoring everything he does and says. Charlie finally laments: “What ya being so mean for, Miss? A man takes a drop too much once and a while, it’s only human nature.” Rose responds, “Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above.”

Nature is what we are put in this world to rise above! In many ways, the modern world is sold on both the truth and the fiction that everything is due to nature. Consider the following:

- Sexuality is a matter of acknowledging our true nature—it is not choice but built into us.
- Alcoholism is a disease—many of us have a genetic disposition for addiction.
- We have a brain that is programmed in stress to do one of three things: fight, flight, or freeze.
- Our economic system of capitalism depends on our nature to take care of ourselves, to address our self-interest. If people stop buying and consuming, our world-order would collapse. My consumption gives people jobs!
- People get sick because of germs and infections. Cancers are mutations built into our nature. We address disease with medicine and technology...not by exorcising demons and evil spirits.

In general, I agree with these statements. However, the trajectory or tide of such acceptance leads toward the acceptance that human nature is all that rules us. And so Charlie Allnut can say for many, if not for all of us, “It’s only human nature.”

Rose Sayer, of course, has the solution. As H.L. Mencken once said, “There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.” Rose, of course, knows that rules are the answers. If everyone just obeyed the rules, then human nature can be overcome. Nature is what we are put into this world to overcome...and following rules is the answer.

Following the rules was a central aspect in the now-controversial psychological experiment conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University in the 1960s (an experiment repeated with variations many times thereafter). The studied result was this: How far will a person go to follow orders. In this case, the order was to teach another person. The teacher, a volunteer, was recruited for the stated purpose of seeing to another volunteer learning a list of words. If the learner made a

mistake, the teacher was to push a button that would give an electric shock to the learner. The electric shock was meant to reinforce the learning. In some variations, the teacher could actually increase the voltage in order to insure the learner answered correctly. The “teachers” in this experiment were all volunteers—they thought their task was to insure that the learner got the words right. The learners were portrayed as “volunteers” as well—or at least that is what the teachers were told.

Actually, the learners were actors, trained to make mistakes and to respond to the electric-shock (they saw a light that indicated they were being shocked and they were show to signs of pain...but there was no actual shock). The real experiment was not about teaching but to find out how far the teachers would go. In the experiment, the consistent result was that teachers were more than willing to shock the learners to help them learn...even to increase the voltage. In some variations of the experiment, the teachers were made aware that the learner had a “heart condition”...but still the teachers cranked up the voltage when the learner made mistakes. And some teachers moved the voltage up to levels that they had been told might be fatal for the learner.

There are all kinds of problems with this testing experiment...and many critiques of the methodology. But what was clear was this—when given the order to teach and produce a result in another person, many will go to dangerous, even fatal, extremes to see that it is done. And this was about learning a list of words...not about crime or border crossings or fraudulent dealings.

If you just had power to make everyone obey the rules...that is the universe that Rose Sayer seeks, because human nature is what we were put on this earth to overcome. But the power to overcome nature is evidently destructive—people will administer electric voltage shocks that could kill another person for the natural capacity to forget some words!

Here’s the crux of where I am going today: morality matters; ethics matter. But morality and ethics simply as rules consistently leads to shaming and abuse. Milgram’s experiment with some simple rules about teaching some words is indicative of how decent people could follow orders to put Jews into concentration camps and exterminate men, women, and children in gas chambers. The excuse given afterwards was simply, “We were following orders.” Likewise, one of the strategic options developed in the Viet Nam War (but actually followed in all wars) is this: We destroy in order to save. What is known as “The My Lai” massacre is simply one example: U.S. soldiers destroyed an entire village—they shot over 400 unarmed grandparents, parents, and children. And they did so, following orders, to save the village!

If you are with me to this point, we have sunk into an abyss. On the one hand, if our lives are determined simply by our nature, then the “law of the jungle” and the “survival of the fittest” is our foundational wisdom. All our life is chemistry, physics, and biology. But if law and order are our solution, then following orders can lead to the cruelest efforts of all. We destroy in order to save—crank up that electricity up!

And it is this abyss into which the Apostle Paul delves in this section of the letter of Colossae. The Apostle Paul clearly knows that we are more than our human nature...but he also knows that rules are not the answer. For Paul, the basis for ethics or morality or responsible living comes down to participation. In short, we participate in Christ’s deliverance—that’s salvation—AND (key “and”) we participate in Christ’s life—that’s ethics. Paul says it this way: *So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are*

*above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (Col. 3:1-4)*

What Paul is saying is that we participate in Christ's death and Christ's life. So take Christ's death—many of us grew up with and have only heard one understanding about the meaning of Christ's death for our salvation. That is, Jesus died for our sins—so we say “Jesus took my place on the cross.” Jesus is the “substitute” who takes the hits meant for us. In this exchange, it is my job to sin; Jesus' job to save. Isn't the world put together nicely! But we are poverty-stricken if that is only way we see salvation—that Jesus died in my place so I can go to heaven.

Here is a richer understanding of the salvation we experience in Christ's death: we participate in Christ's death. Jesus does not die to give us a “get-out-of-hell” card. Jesus dies so that we can die with him. His dying for us is to give us that opportunity to participate, to suffer with him. And if we participate in his death, then we can participate in his life. And participating in his life—that's ethics! We don't live for the rules—we live the life of those who already know something of the heavenly kingdom. That's great theology...but what might that look like?

Let me see if I can help you to see what I mean with a story (one that some may have heard before but I think bears repeating). In the late 1960s, Millard Fuller and Clarence Jordan founded an effort that has become Habitat for Humanity—enabling the working poor to purchase and build their own homes. Their effort in south Georgia was greeted with a great deal of suspicion. Habitat construction sites were vandalized, hateful graffiti decorated work sites; the community reaction was severe against it. The stated reason for this opposition was this: The attempt to build low-cost housing for the working poor seemed a mixture of Communism and do-gooderism. And it was upsetting the accepted racial boundaries in south Georgia.

Ethel and Tom Dunning were one of the first participants. They were sharecroppers living in a tenant house—a “shack” is probably a more appropriate term. They had the opportunity to purchase and help build their own house through the Habitat program. The owners of their shack, a husband and wife, tried to convince Tom and Ethel to have nothing to do with the Habitat program. When Tom and Ethel went ahead, the owners had the water turned off to the tenant house. When Tom and Ethel asked about their water—the water came from the well that also fed “the big house” where the owners lived—they were told: We agreed to rent you the house but we are not obligated to provide water. So for over four months, the Dunnings had to haul water from a pump a quarter of a mile from their home for the basic necessities. Ethel had to hitch a ride into town to the laundry mat once a week—their washer machine was useless without water.

Just before they were to move, the owner's wife phoned Ethel and asked her to make some of her special cakes. The owner's wife said “her boy”—her son—and daughter-in-law were coming to town and that she wanted something special for them. Ethel's cakes would fit the bill...something special for her loved ones. Ethel's response was: “Yes mam, I'd be glad to cook'em—but you know I ain't got no water!” “Oh Ethel, that's right. I'd forgotten,” came the response. “Well, you just come over to my house and make them here.”

And Ethel went and spent the day, making those special cakes. Later, when asked how she could do that—be so helpful to someone who had created so many problems for her, Ethel Dunning said in the best theological language in the shortest phrase: “To do that, you got to be buried and dug up.”

To do that, you got to be buried and dug up. Buried—you are dead to this present age that demands you live by your nature. My nature would have been to respond to that request about the cakes with “Heck no” (actually my response is not fitting for the pulpit!). But Ethel was buried—she participated in Christ’s death. And she was “dug up”—she participated in Christ’s life. She was free to live now by the dictates and wisdom of the next age—to do not as she had been done to, but as she would want to be done to her. Ethel could live by the standards and practices of the future age, now present. Ethel Dunning was buried and dug up!

Hear again how Apostle Paul said it: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Or, just keep remembering Ethel Dunning: You are buried and have been dug up!