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A Positive Christian Life (Some Ugly Words Redeemed)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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We are seeing in our day a fuller development of things in human nature which are governed by the poison which got in with the serpent's bite; things which, in themselves, are not necessarily essentially inherently evil, but which have come in the course of time to be regarded as almost, if not entirely, wholly evil, but it is the motive power behind them which is evil. It is the evil thing that has come in. Human nature itself is not essentially evil. It is the poisoned human nature that is evil, and so we are seeing a very terrible development of poisoned human nature and what it can do.

Now we have got to get some light. We must get clear about some things, and until we are and until we have that light, we are likely, if not certainly, to be found in a position and condition of impotence and ineffectiveness. What I mean is this, that there is a very widespread idea (I might go further and say conviction) amongst Christian people that when you come to the Lord Jesus and when you come to salvation, when you come to the Christian life, you enter upon a realm and a course of suppression. All sorts of things are wrong, you regard them as wrong, and you simply must not do them, you must not allow them, you must not have them, and so it becomes a matter of continuously repressing, saying "No", and in the case of too many, the Christian life has become a negative thing. There are many, especially young people, who revolt against the idea of the negative and strike out for something positive, but they also may be mistaken. Now, I am not going to be occupied now very much with that second class, unless all that I have to say answers them. What I am concerned with at the moment is this first and much larger class of Christians who are negative because they feel so many things are wrong and must be shut down.

Before I go further, let me say at once that, truly understood and rightly entered into, there is nothing more positive than a true Holy Spirit governed life. A Holy Spirit governed life is not a negative life. That is perfectly clear from the New Testament, that when the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost everything became very much alive and of a positive character. From that time it was not, for those who knew the Spirit's fulness and power, a life of repression, a life of saying "No" constantly, a life which was negative. It was a very positive life indeed and so ought a Spirit-filled and Spirit-governed life to be something quite positive, and it is for want of that positive element that there is so much ineffectiveness.

I might almost say that there is so much spiritual anaemia and lack of real interest. We are so negative, we are waiting all the time for something to happen, we have to be stirred up to move to action. We have constantly to be prompted and exhorted. Well now, may that not be because of a misapprehension, because we have, not by thinking it out, of course, but simply taking on something we have come to the position that this is not allowed and that is not allowed, and we have got to guard against this and guard against that all the time lest we might come into certain categories which are banned and which might be called "soulish", or something like that! Now, it is just at that thing that I want to get now as the Lord will enable. I feel it to be a very necessary word, to just get right in between those two things: a negative and a positive Christian life. And so I return in principle to that with which I started.

What we are seeing today in the world is the development of things which are in human nature and in themselves not wrong, but are propelled, mastered, and governed by an evil principle. The Christian life or salvation, is not intended to make us other than human beings so that human nature itself has got to be suppressed and that various and numerous marks and features of human life and nature are to be blotted out, but salvation is the extricating of the poison, the getting rid of the evil principle and turning those very things to account for God. I am going to deal with some of those things, the names of which have become some of the ugliest names in history, and names which represent things which you and I will at once mentally register with something of repudiation.

Ambition

I begin with ambition. Now, it is quite clear that what is happening today in this world springs from ambition, and how many evils take their rise from ambition! Ambition has got something about it for Christians which is not good. If we say a person is an ambitious person, we do not mean something wholly good, there is something in us which means that there is something not right, not good, not as it should be about such a person. This world has seen a very great deal of suffering and sorrow resultant from ambition and ambitiousness. An ambitious person very often rides roughshod over many fine things.

The real strength of ambition is this, that it must reach its end no matter how, at whatever cost, even to others. The end justifies the means, and so it does not matter what the means may be - go for the end! Once you get the end, all the other will not matter. You see that today, don't you? That is ambition, and it works out in a multitude of ways. But when we think of ambition or ambitiousness as something with a question about it, when we see it working out to so much suffering and evil, and then dub it at once a wrong thing, we may be in danger of cutting the very vitals of something which in itself is good and right and not evil, because we see the principle lying behind ambition in human nature as it is. And so we say all ambitiousness must be suppressed, we must not be ambitious.

What is the result? Well, we have no vision, we have no objective, we have no dynamic. We have nothing worth living for, nothing to go for, there is no real kick in life. We become very uninteresting people and it is against that that our young friends revolt as they see that in a kind of middle-aged Christianity that is fast getting past the land of prospect, vision and outlook. They say Christians are very uninteresting people, they have not got very much before them, all the vigour has gone out of life.

Now, we have got to have a mighty revolt against what I have called "middle-aged Christianity", where you feel you have passed the meridian and you are going down the hill and everything lies behind. What is wrong with this? Well, we have decided that the thing is evil because we see that thing mastered by a certain evil passion or principle resulting therefore in a great deal of damage and harm. But what the Lord wants to do is to rescue ambition from the evil principle and to put another principle into it; not to kill ambition, but to put His own Divine principle into ambition. So I can bring you to two or three Scriptures in which that very word occurs.

"Wherefore we are ambitious, whether at home or absent, to be well-pleasing unto Him" (2 Cor. 5:9, margin).

"Oh," you may say, "Paul has put his seal upon something very evil!" No, he has not. He has simply transferred the thing from one realm into another, but he has not only done that. What happens when you simply transfer a thing from one realm to another, what you might call the bad realm to the good realm, without extricating the bad principle, is that before long that principle gets up in the Christian realm. Take ambition. It is not long before, either in the individual or in the collective life of a movement, a denomination, or a mission, you find that that piece of work into which they had thrown themselves with ambition becomes *their* piece of work, *their* cabbage patch, with the attitude of, "You keep off my cabbage patch!" You have got the old principle coming up and that is where the wrong is.

You cannot transfer a thing just from one sphere to another and redeem it. There is something to be done radically in the very nature. One principle, one power, has got to be broken and destroyed, and another principle and power has got to be put in. An evil thing has got to be broken, and a Divine thing has got to take its place, but that in which the principle or power operates is still the same thing. So when Paul says about ambition, "We are ambitious", he has redeemed something.

Let us go to another passage.

"But we exhort you, brethren, that ye abound more and more; and that ye be ambitious to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your hands, even as we charged you" (1 Thess. 4:10-11, margin).

"Be ambitious to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Now here in these three passages you have got three things Paul says are to have ambition behind them. The first has to do with what we are, "*Wherefore we are ambitious to be well-pleasing unto Him*". Ambition, then, is to come into the realm and direction of what we are and that in the sight of God.

Ah, that is not the direction of natural, unregenerated ambition, but what we are inwardly in our character. I think if there were a little ambitiousness about what we are in an inward way in the sight of God, there would be a great deal less of what we have in the world today as the result of this ambitiousness of human nature. So the very first word that we would say is that the Christian is to be ambitious and tremendously ambitious, but with the Christian, the child of God, ambitiousness is to be first of all above all else a matter of being well-pleasing unto Him. What we *are* - that will govern everything else, and all the rest that I may have to say need not be said if this were true. That is the first statement. Let us note it and lay it to heart.

Now you have no need to suppress ambitiousness, but rather that it shall be redeemed and motivated by this great consideration. First of all let it take hold of us: our great object in life, our ambition, is to be well-pleasing unto Him, to be that which satisfies the Lord. That is a good sphere of ambition and a good object of ambition. It is very simple but it is very practical, and in every matter we have got to resolve it into that. Every consideration has got to be governed by this: Is it well-pleasing unto the Lord? Not, "Does it reach the end that I have and satisfy my interests?" Not even that negative position: "Is it positively evil", or, "What harm is there in it?" No such reasonings and arguments. A Holy Spirit life is always a positive life. It always takes the positive line and not the negative, and the positive side of ambition for the child of God is, is it well-pleasing to Him? That governs everything.

Then the second passage in 1 Thess. 4:11: "*That ye be ambitious to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your hands, even as we charged you*". Here is another direction for ambition. It is to be absolutely conscientious in duty. That is what it says here. Be quiet. I take it that what the apostle meant was, "Not always gossiping", not found in that realm of talking about other people's affairs. "And do your own business and labour with your own hands" - apply yourself to the duty which is your duty. Be ambitious to apply yourself to being conscientious before God in the matter of your daily activities, your work, the work with your hands. What a lot of problems that would solve if there were ambition in this direction. I know it has little appeal for some folk when you say, "Be ambitious to work with your hands." To some that has an appeal, but to some it has not. They lack the positive element, and again I am going to say that a Holy Spirit governed life is not an indolent, negligent life; it is not a slovenly or disorderly life. A Holy Spirit governed life is a life of diligence, conscientiousness, application, and a life of giving heed to your duties. Let that come home to us. That is positive.

I am quite sure that when the Holy Spirit really does get us utterly, we shall not be untidy or habitually unpunctual people. Visiting our homes, you will not find them careless. In these ways it will not be possible to say that Christians are careless, untidy people. It is important that we should really recognise the practical side of a Christian life. Be ambitious to be quiet - not a 'gadabout' - I don't like the phrase, but it is a good one. Do your own business and work with your own hands. That is very practical, but that is in the Word of God, and that was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and so the apostle redeems the word again. It brings it out of the realm of loss into the realm of positive gain, and puts the Holy Spirit into ambition and gets us tuned up in our daily manner of life.

And the third passage, 2 Tim. 2:15: "*Be ambitious to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth*." Here is ambition in the direction of God's approval with our work, work that has been put in our way, entrusted to us, to which we have been called, that in that work we should have the approval of God. Now, you know where God has put you for the time being and where God is holding you. No doubt you would like to be in something else. Perhaps for a long time you have been revolting against where you are and what you are doing. You

know what the Lord has tied you down to at present. You know He has called you into a certain vocation in life. You may be trying hard to get out of it and do something else, trying to make yourself and others believe that another kind of work is your work, but really, when you come to it, you know that you cannot get out of where you are and that you are tied, you are held, you are the prisoner of the Lord in that. Well now, let us face it and hear what the Lord says to us, "Be ambitious to be approved of God in your work" - "a workman that needs not to be ashamed", and until you and I are approved of God in that to which for the time being He has called us, in which He has placed us, however irksome it may be, you may be quite sure that you will never get into anything else. I believe that many a life is being deprived of a far greater fruitfulness which might be in it because it has not been ambitious to get God's approval where it is, defeating its own enlargement. Let us take account of what our job is under the sovereign hand of God for the time being and see to it that our ambition is to be approved there in that, and then we shall discover where the Lord has something else for us and we shall be led out into it. But whatever it is, let us remember that the way to promotion, to enlargement, is approval where we are.

That is not to be a matter of resignedness. Resignedness is negative. Not, "Oh, well, I am here. The Lord evidently wants me here for the time being. The will of the Lord be done". No, be ambitious. See what ambition is when it is gripped by the full force of evil power. Why should not ambition be gripped by the power of the Holy Spirit and see what result - enlargement, increase of territory!

Boastfulness

Another word which we all hate. We have only got to use the word, and everybody, however guilty they may be of it, hates it. They may love it and hate it with all their hearts - boasting. Who likes a boaster? Who admires a boaster? And oh, what we are seeing today of the boast of men! We are revolted almost every day at boasting in this world, boasting as to what they are, as to what they can do, as to what they have, as to what they are going to do. Boasting - we hate it.

But in itself boasting is not necessarily and essentially evil. It is the principle behind it again, and Paul in his redemption of a whole host of these things, has redeemed boasting. You know how many things Paul says about boasting. We have 2 Cor. 11:16-18.

"I say again, Let no man think me foolish; but if ye do, yet as foolish receive me, that I also may glory a little. That which I speak, I speak not after the Lord, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of glorying. Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also."

What is that but boasting? What is he boasting of?

"...in labours more abundantly... in stripes above measure... in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in labour and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness" (v.23-27).

I venture to say that if you get into a situation like that, in any one of those situations, it is not the flesh that is boasting. The flesh does not boast when you are going through a bad time. If you are in a shipwreck, the flesh does not boast. If you are in prison, the flesh does not boast. If you are in

sickness, desperately ill, the flesh does not boast. It is not the flesh principle that is boasting. If you glory at all, it must be a work of grace in you, it must be by the Divine enablement, it must be a mighty triumph over nature. It must be something of the Lord, if, when in affliction and suffering and desperate conditions, you glory in the Lord and you come to the place of boasting in your God. Oh, something has happened reversing the order of human nature.

Then what is this boasting? Oh, it is boasting of the marvellous grace and triumph of the Lord in your life over against the most difficult and adverse conditions. Satan set his eye upon you for your destruction. You were a marked man, a marked woman, where the devil is concerned. He marked you down, tracked you down, at every turn he sought to get you, but God delivered; again and again you were delivered and you make your boast in your God, and you say, "It is wonderful what a Lord we have, what a Deliverer He is, how He brings us through again and again!" So we, in the enablement of the Holy Spirit, come to boast of the experiences through which we have passed because they display the glory of God.

David said, "My soul shall make her boast in the Lord" (Psa. 34:2). Ah, it is boasting in God, and there is nothing else to boast of, so that boasting in truth, in reality, is bound up with what God is, and not what we are or can do. It brings God into His place and brings glory to God, and that is the only legitimate boast. All other is evil and wrong, but the Lord wants us to be those who boast, who have something to boast about, who have a story to tell of what the Lord is to us, of what the Lord does for us, and how the Lord has delivered us. That is testimony and what is testimony but boasting in God? It does not sound a nice word, I know, but Paul says here that he boasted and he would boast, but never did Paul boast of what he was in himself; not for a moment do you catch a glimmer, or a suggestion in all this, of Paul saying, "But I got out of it, I outwitted the devil, I was master of the situation, they did not get me after all, I went one better". No, there is no 'I' in it. It is the 'I' in boasting which makes it poisonous. It is the 'I' in boasting which makes it so evil and objectionable. It is the Lord in boasting which redeems boasting and makes boasting a thing of glory. We ought to be Christians with a positive note. Well, I pass on.

Rivalry

Here is another. Oh, it is a thing that does a lot of harm. Rivalry is a very blighting thing. It destroys the very essence of fellowship. It makes increase and enlargement impossible. You get two people together, for instance, and they are all the time trying to go one better than the other. There is a rivalry always trying to have the advantage in their hands. How far can you get with that sort of thing; outdoing one another, that is what it amounts to. That is a very evil thing, a very poisonous thing, a very devastating thing, a blighting thing, and it, in its principle and nature, has got to go or we will get nowhere.

But rivalry has a place when the evil poisonous element is taken out of it. So here we are again in 2 Cor. 9:2:

"For I know your readiness... and your zeal (*emulation of you, margin*) has stirred up very many of them."

The emulation has stirred up very many of them. What to? To emulate you, to out-do you, to rival you. Rivalry! But here is rivalry brought into a realm of real gain to the Lord and real gain to the Lord's people. Here were saints who were moved to the meeting of need very earnestly and

wholeheartedly; seeking that a need should not exist but that everything should be there as far as it was in their power to see to it; everything that should be there for the carrying on of this ministry, and their zeal in this matter was infectious. It spread, it got into the very atmosphere, so that beyond the immediate touch with them, others were infected by it and they were stirred up to emulate and to go one better; at least to see that they were not left behind these people. You see holy rivalry, not just to out-do, but motivated by devotion to the Lord's interests. Now, you can have as much rivalry as you like if it is real devotion to the Lord's interests, but when it becomes something personal, to gain advantage, to go one better, to stand a bit above the other, ah, you see what mischief it can do. That is going on in the world today. It is lying behind this world situation - the ambition to out-do. Of course, now it applies to world conquest, to dominions, to empires, and this ambition is to go beyond, to stand better, to get the advantage. It is an awful rivalry in the quest for world domination, and you see what has happened. That is its evil side.

But that can come down to thousands of little ways in personal life. It can touch us in dress, in all sorts of things. Rivalry is a horrible thing. It spoils everything; fellowship is no longer possible, and when you speak someone tries to get an advantage of you. They are going to do better than you. Well, you cannot get on with that. Any kind of thing like that makes spiritual things an impossibility.

Rivalry itself is not evil, but it has got to come into the right realm and be motivated by the love of God. It is the thing behind that matters, the love of God; that the very foundations of life have been purged of the poison of the soul and have become impregnated with the love of God, the nature of God, and then life will be positive. Yes, rivalry, but holy rivalry, that we shall not be one whit behind the best in seeing to the Lord's interests. Are we like that? Is there this holy rivalry about us or are we of those negative Christians without anything really positive?

Jealousy

One last thing, and perhaps it is the worst word of all - jealousy. We may be as jealous as it is possible to be, but we hate it, we hate the word and in others we hate the thing. Surely we cannot redeem this? If we know anything about the workings of jealousy, we have no place for that. Jealousy is said in the Word of God to be as cruel as the grave; that is, it robs the world of everything, of all hope, all prospect of joy, everything that is beautiful goes with the grave. What is jealousy? Well, after all, it is just the fear of being deprived of something to which we regard ourselves as entitled, something which we consider as ours, our right, something we are entitled to, that is ours, and we have got a fear of having that taken from us and that fear born of jealousy makes life a suspicious thing. The first-born child of jealousy is suspicion. Jealousy can suspect where there is no room for suspicion, can create objects of suspicion as numerous spectres and phantoms in its world, and then life becomes sour and hostile. That is jealousy. You see, jealousy is all destructive in fallen human nature. Everybody is going to fall under its axe. Anything coming within the realm of jealousy will be the object of being torn to pieces. Jealousy is always destructive.

And yet how much there is in the Word of God, both in the Old and New Testaments, that puts jealousy into another realm altogether and makes a good thing of it. Why, you do not open your Bible and get very far before you read, "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God", (Ex. 20:5). The Old Testament is full of the jealousy of God, and there is also much in the New Testament. We will take just one example.

"I am jealous over you with a jealousy of God" (2 Cor. 11:2, margin).

I think it is hardly necessary to go on with this. We know what this means. What is the difference between natural jealousy and Divine jealousy? What is the jealousy which has got to be saved from its evil principle and become a good thing, a right thing, a virtue? Oh, can jealousy ever be a virtue? Yes. It is a virtue in God. It was a virtue in the apostle Paul and it can be a virtue in us. And beloved, a Christian life without jealousy is a weak, anaemic thing, but the difference is this, that Divine jealousy, the jealousy born of the Holy Spirit, is always constructive. Now, test your jealousy by that. It is never motivated by anything personal, because whenever there is a personal motive, a thing is circumscribed at once. It is destructive, it is robbed of something, but when the personal element is taken out of jealousy and the interests are the Lord's interests, the jealousy becomes constructive. We have got to be jealous that the Lord should have in us and in others all that to which He has a right, that the Lord shall not lose His rights, or be deprived of that which is His right; be jealous with a fiery burning jealousy, like Elijah, a man governed by the Holy Spirit, who said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts" (1 Kings 19:10).

Now, here is a brood of evil things, evil because of the principle. They are in our hearts by nature and therefore our hearts have got to be cleansed from the evil brood and into our hearts a right spirit has got to be placed to motive these things; not to take away from us ambition, boasting, rivalry, jealousy, but to transfigure us and them, to bring in an altogether new power. With all this and very much more, let us get the point.

The Lord wants His people to be positive and not negative, marked by things which are clearly defined, not a life that really does not carry with it anything that is striking, that is definite, that has got an impact. The Lord wants us to count and these are the things that count, and do you not recognise that it is always in the realm where there is the positive that there is success? We talk about initiative and if the initiative gets into certain hands, it is with the people who have the initiative that the advance is. We have seen that today, and the great struggle is to get the initiative out of certain hands into other hands. What is the initiative? Break it up. It is ambition working out, it is a positive element, and it is never until you are stung into something that you seek to get the initiative. You see that there is something to be preserved or something to be gained, and when that becomes a life issue, then you seek to get the initiative. When you have not got initiative, well, the advance is all on the other side all the time, and I think satan has gained a great deal because he has kept the initiative. You notice that the things that satan has hold of are 'go-ahead' things. Some of the great systems produced by satan are tremendously 'go-ahead' things, and the one thing which has so largely to lie at the door of a multitude of Christians is that they are not exercised, they are taking it too easy. Oh, to take a leaf out of the book of some of these other systems!

The Lord does not want us to think that our lives have got to be lives of repression and suppression. They have got to be lives marked by what is positive, with initiative. Therefore there must be holy ambition, there must be holy rivalry, there must be holy boasting, there must be holy jealousy. These things have got to be brought into a place where they are active and energetic. May the Lord just teach us how to be positive and not negative Christians.