

MAN'S BASIC NATURE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 7, 1967 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

No subject is more interesting than man himself. Every aspect of man is interesting: his origin, his destiny, his thought, his speech, his behavior, his possessions, and especially his goals and purposes in life. But nothing is more interesting to me than a discussion of man's basic nature. Is man basically good, or basically evil, or only neutral?

Some of you in this audience left your small children down stairs in the nursery only a few minutes ago. What is your verdict? Are these tiny human beings basically good, or evil, or neutral? It is not difficult to guess your answer, for I know that each of you feels that your children are almost angels from heaven. Like Jochebed, the mother of Moses, we parents are likely to think our children are wonderful. In Ex. 2:2, we read of this ancient woman, that she "bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months." It is difficult to think of a mother who does not feel that her child is a "goodly child." And, of course, this is as it should be. How tragic it is, in those unfortunate exceptions when a mother does not think her child is wonderful. All of us, when we are in our right minds, think of our children as good. But does this necessarily make it so? Is the basic nature of mankind good?

Basically Evil

There are some who have viewed man as "born totally depraved," weighed down by "Adam's sin." Oddly enough, those who have been most outspoken on this matter have been some of the most noted of religious leaders, men like Augustine and Calvin. Their thesis has been simple. They believe that all men have inherited Adam's sin and are therefore sinners at birth and are lost until in some special way the grace of God has been applied to their lives. Millions now living have been baptized (using the term loosely) as infants, purely as a result of this doctrine of total depravity which imagines children are born lost and need immediate action to be saved. Certain scriptures are sometimes quoted by those who hold this view: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall call be made alive." (I Cor. 15:22). Romans 3:10, 23, are other passages often mentioned: "There is none righteous, no, not one ... All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God."

Are children evil at birth? Look at a child and you will see that he is quite selfish, and makes demands of his parents that are most inconsiderate. He cries in the middle of the night and will not stop until his mother supplies his every need, even though she may be exhausted from the endless procession of duties which accompany child care. His wish must be her command. He seems totally unconcerned about her welfare, or that of other children in the family. Someone has even described the newborn baby as a barbarian, totally self-centered and uncompromisingly demanding. Look at man when he is grown. Again, he often appears selfish and sometimes even cruel and ruthless. Often he is unconcerned about the wants and needs of others, so long as his desires are met. Yes, there is a great deal of evidence that indicates that the nature of man is ugly and evil.

Charles Darwin, in his announcement of his theories on evolution a little more than a century ago, implied that man's nature was evil when he taught that the world is like a jungle, in which the strong survive and the weak perish. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, held a rather pessimistic view of the nature of man. Is man's nature evil? I am not ready to buy this idea, for I feel that in spite of the evidence that has been marshaled, it has not been proved that man's basic nature is evil. Let us look at a second alternative.

Essentially Neutral

When one visits the maternity section of a modern hospital and looks through the large glass windows into the nursery, he may see a dozen or even twenty newborn infants. No one of them has ever conceived an evil thought, nor a good thought. No one of them has ever uttered God's name in profanity, nor God's name in praise and adoration. They are neither good nor bad. The view that basic human nature is neutral holds that man is a product of his culture--for good or evil. It is the world about him that ultimately determines what he will be. The whole story is told in terms of heredity and environment.

This view would be deeply disturbing, if true. It would mean that the Bible is all wrong. It would mean that God is totally wrong in assigning praise to some and blame to others. There would be no real responsibility on the part of anyone, for it would be the environment that would be to blame. This deterministic, behavioristic view of life does not take into consideration the fact that there is something within man that determines what he will do with his heredity and his environment, This view of man's nature, we also must reject.

Basically Good

It is my conviction that there are many evidences that man's nature is essentially good. It is also interesting and encouraging to note that a large and growing number of psychologists take this view. On the physical level, there are several factors which indicate that

man is neither evil nor neutral. For example, though man's instincts are few, he does have a strong instinct to live, and to be well and healthy. This instinct appears to be universal, and through the centuries has driven man to seek food, water, shelter, and the other necessities of life. There is this in-born drive to stay alive and to keep well.

In addition, man has a repair system built into his body. When a bruise or a cut occurs the body immediately begins to heal itself. When disease germs attack, the defensive mechanism goes to work. Yet again, man is adaptable to all kinds of situations, and to a remarkable degree. Yet again, man himself is a remarkably sophisticated and intricately designed organism. So, as one looks at this marvelous mechanism which is man, he cannot but see that it is designed and created in such a way as to demonstrate a positive, constructive, quality of goodness. It is designed to do certain important works, and even though they are extremely difficult, it does them amazingly well.

On the higher moral and ethical level, man further demonstrates that he is to intrinsically good. Just here I would like to lean on C. S. Lewis in the opening chapters of his challenging little book, *Mere Christianity*. Putting his argument in my own words, I would begin by pointing out that when men quarrel and argue they are pre-supposing some kind of right and wrong. Otherwise an argument in which one accuses the other of wrong would be meaningless. I saw a man only yesterday who makes little or no profession of religion, but who was quite angry because a friend had told him he would do one thing, but did another. He felt he had been wronged. His friend had violated the standard. Now, his standard was not taken from the Bible, nor did he accuse his friend because he had done something contrary to God's teaching, but he accused his friend because he had violated one of the general universal standards of man.

C. S. Lewis calls this the Law of Human Nature, and suggests that it includes such things as "tell the truth," "pay your debts," "fair play," "respect for another's life," "respect for another's property," and "respect for another's wife." This code is well-nigh universal. It contains the basic, fundamental, central rules by which all men of all time and of all races have played the game of life. The essential elements of this code were known and respected among the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Greeks, Romans, and practically everyone else. Nowhere in all the world today nor in history are cowards in battle praised for their actions. Nowhere are those who double-cross their friends given honor and esteem. Nowhere are thieves and murderers praised by their fellows. There are some differences in this code of behavior among the different races, but these differences are impressively minor. Man seems to have a universal respect for these basic, essential tenets.

Man Explains

It is interesting to note that when men violate this Law of Human Nature they try to explain their behavior. A man will say, "I did not do what I promised, because my mother became ill ... " He explains his failure to live up to his promise because a higher law prevented it. Or he may say, "I lied to him because he had lied to me." Or, yet again, he may say, "I stole from him, because my babies were in need of food." In each case, he is explaining his failure to live up to one of the moral tenets of the code, by a reference to some superior law.

It is just here that we would take notice of the fact that even godless communism today justifies its actions by saying, "The capitalistic nations are enemies of the people, therefore they must be opposed." or, "The capitalists are wrong because they wage aggressive wars ... " In short, communism argues against us by referring to a standard. This basic feeling for right and wrong does not appear to be taught, but seems to be inborn in all men. We often call it conscience. It is a sensitivity on the part of human beings to the moral and ethical rules by which life must be lived.

Immanuel Kant, the noted philosopher, once wrote, "Two things fill me with wonder and awe--the starry heavens above and the moral law within." He was referring to the sense of ought in man. Animals do not have it. Only man has it. Man is a creature of choice, and by making his choices he determines his course in life and his destiny in eternity. The sense of ought in the human heart is one of the most convincing evidences that man's nature is essentially good.

It was in this area that the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "When Gentiles that have not the law (of Moses) do by nature the things of the law, these, not having the law, are the law unto themselves: in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them." (Rom. 2:14-15). Paul was speaking of what Lewis calls the Law of Human Nature, and was saying, in effect, that if the Gentiles lived up to the law in their hearts, then in God's sight they would not be sinners. However, he hastens on to say that no one does live up to the law perfectly, and therefore they need the saving gospel of Christ which takes away sin.

The Ability to Love

Another quality that stamps man's nature as good is his ability to give and to receive love. Of all earth's creatures only man can really know the meaning of love. Animals may feel an affection for their masters, but this is far from the feeling of love that is possible within the human heart. For example, it is unthinkable to imagine a dog, no matter how much he might be attached to his master, feeling sacrificial love. If there were only one portion of food, it would be utterly impossible to imagine a dog thinking, "I will leave

this food for my master, for it is more important for him to have it than for me to have it.” A mother would feel this way for a child, but not a dog for a master.

I spoke a few moments ago of babies in the nursery of some hospital. Whether they grow up to be happy well-adjusted people, satisfying to themselves and useful to their fellowman, will depend largely upon the love that they are given. We human beings thrive on the love and affection of those who mean most to us in life. The giving and the receiving of love is that unique level of goodness which only human beings know. Man’s ability to love and to be loved stamps him as on a higher level than anything else that lives.

The Bible

Thus far I have spoken of the evidences that man’s basic nature is good, as if the Bible did not exist. I have been thinking of those who do not know God, and do not accept his inspired word. For those of us who do believe the Bible, and that includes most of us who are here, the evidence in the scriptures is clear-cut and impressive. We know that man’s nature is good because we read, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ... And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him ...” (Gen. 1:26-27). Again, we read in the eighth Psalm, ‘What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him but little lower than God, and crownest him with glory and honor. Thou makest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet: All Sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the heaven, and the fish of the sea, Whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.’” (Ps. 3:4-8).

We know that man is good, because we hear Jesus say, “Suffer the little children to come unto me; forbid them not: for to such belongeth the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10-14). This is Christ’s estimate of a child. The kingdom of heaven is made up of such. God’s estimate of man is suggested in Matt. 10:30, where we learn that the very hairs of the head are all numbered. Still another way that we learn man’s importance is from the words of Jesus, “For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his life?” (Matt. 16:26). One man is worth more than all of the world. All of this suggests that man’s nature is very good indeed.

Conclusion

In summary we may say that in the beginning God created man pure and holy. Then man was contaminated by sin. Ultimately, Christ came to redeem man. Man’s true nature is good indeed, but sin has corrupted that nature. It is in this sense that “as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” Man did not inherit the guilt of Adam’s sin, so does not begin life as a depraved sinner. But man does partake of the sins of the world, and therefore the inspired writer could say, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Christ came to redeem man from his sins and this makes it imperative that we come to Christ for cleansing.

Let us live up to our highest nature. Let us follow Christ who renews and restores the original goodness of the nature of man. It is in this vein that Augustine could say, “Our souls are never at rest until they find rest in Thee.”