

HOW TO SUCCEED IN INIQUITY WITHOUT REALLY SINNING

A Sermon in Reverse

by Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Psalm 51:3. "For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me."

This man deserves our pity. He has a conscience. He is a poor hand at the art of self-deception. He feels unworthy before God. Such a man could only live in a barbaric age.

It is true that this man finds some consolation in religion. But at what a price! He must endure the tortures of remorse and the indignity of repentance. He looks to God for forgiveness. Let us grant that he even receives forgiveness. But how much happier he would be if he could convince himself that there is nothing to forgive!

It is precisely this splendid opportunity that I offer you this morning. It is a higher way of life, a step above the old gospel. For the gospel only promises pardon for your sins and the grace to make a new beginning. My way removes the burden of sin entirely and leaves you free to do as you please. It is said of Christians that they sin just like other people only they enjoy it less. Perhaps that is your problem. You are sinning more these days, but enjoying it less. Well now, I offer you a chance to relish the fruits of sin as much as you like yet with the assurance that you are not really sinning at all.

You may have some reservations about this offer. You may wonder whether it is quite respectable. But I assure you that I have taken pains to give it the sanction of the best authorities. The genius of this higher way is that it can adapt to its purposes all the latest notions, - theological, psychological, sociological - whichever sort happen to appeal most to you. Nor need you feel that you must give up your Christian connections. With the application of a little imagination you can call the method itself Christian. Indeed, many people do already. Therefore, have no fears. Think positively! From what has been said so far I think you must agree that my method of dealing with sin is much to be desired. All that remains is for me to tell you how it works.

Here is the first step. Say to yourself these words every day. I CAN'T HELP THE WAY I AM. Say them the first thing when you awake in the morning and the last thing when you retire at night. I CAN'T HELP THE WAY I AM. You may find it useful to write this sentence out on a little three by five card and to place it on your dresser as a reminder. And if you are biblically minded, add a fitting verse from Scripture. There is one in the very Psalm we just quoted that will serve very nicely:

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.

That verse is particularly appropriate because it points up something we have all discovered about ourselves. If there is anything wrong with us, our mothers are to blame. We are the helpless victims of unhappy childhood experiences. We are the pawns in a game played by heredity and environment. If we cheated on our tax forms the cause is to be found in the fact that during our tender years we were forced to consume too many strained peas. In short, whatever we may be today, somebody or something else (especially mother) made us that way. We are not responsible.

All this may sound a little far-fetched. Yet, as I said, you can find any number of learned authorities to buttress such a happy point of view. As we have seen, even the Bible may be used to good advantage. Of course, such resources usually require a good deal of interpretation and some selective quoting out of context. But if you are clever, - and no man is so clever as when he is hoodwinking himself - you will find an endless fund of literary assistance at your disposal.

Regardless of the resources you may use, the important thing to keep in mind is that you are not a responsible person. No matter what you are or what you do, you really cannot help yourself. Therefore, instead of worrying about your sins like that weebegone, old Psalmist, simply accept yourself just the way you are. You know, that's an important word right now, the word acceptance. We often use it today to excuse other people's bad behavior. Why not apply the benefits of this idea to ourselves. Accept yourself. That's the simple formula. Accept yourself, which is to say, take yourself just as you are and be satisfied.

So there is the first step. Tell yourself that you can't help the way you are. The second is like unto it. Remind yourself repeatedly that it is not healthy to be too good. Extreme virtue isn't normal. When you come down to it all the "saints" were a little queer. People who walk the straight and narrow have something wrong with their nervous systems. They are half-dead or something. They just don't feel and desire the way other people do. Moreover, everybody knows that if you press down too hard on your id, your super-ego is likely to go berserk.

Some years ago Dr. John Haynes Holmes wrote a little poem in reaction to certain trends in contemporary literature. You know, those sweaty novels about LOVE AND LIFE. The poem attracted so much notice that part of it is now in Bartlett's Quotations. It goes like this:

I've been married eighteen years
And still adore my wife.
I have no hunger for other women,
I am content to be faithful,
I am resigned to decency.
I actually think I have found love
And life.
What's the matter with me?

I don't know, but I hope he saw his analyst in time.

Remind yourself that excess virtue is unhealthy. Be sure as well to emphasize the reverse truth: a little immorality strengthens the character. When you read the biographies of famous people, always look for those seamy little incidents which the author has taken such pains to reveal "for the first time." Tell yourself that these moral lapses make such people more interesting, more "human" in fact, that they could not have gotten anywhere without such experiences. And when reading more fanciful literature you might note that Satan usually cuts a more dashing figure than Michael or Gabriel. I say nothing of God. Let's face it, he is usually a bore. This is a contrast worth pondering.

The second step is to recognize that it is only healthy to be virtuous to a certain extent. By certain extent, I mean to the degree that it pays. After all, people do require outlets. If their behavior isn't always quite proper, they aren't really sinning. They are just doing what comes naturally.

The third step is one that is especially easy for modern Protestants, especially those who go dialoguing with culture and all that sort of thing. For it makes use of one of their most deep-seated fears. It is the fear of being counted among the Pharisees.

This step takes its departure from a teaching of Jesus that may be summed up thusly:

It is better to be a no-good bum than a self-righteous prig.

Your task is to prove that you are not a self-righteous prig by doing everything you can to show that you are a no-good bum.

There are several parts to this third step. One part consists in always believing the worst about other people. In particular, you need to accuse people of the Pharisaic qualities; that is to say, of performing good deeds out of hypocrisy, or smugness or a sterile conformity to custom. This is not hard to do. It is our nature to attribute unworthy motives to those who act more worthily than we.

For example, if you notice that a certain person goes to church regularly, tell yourself, "he just does that to make a show." If it is reported that someone has donated liberally to a worthy cause, comment inwardly, "he likes to throw his money around in order to be regarded as a philanthropist." Of the man who stays sober at the wedding reception, observe to yourself, "he's only protecting his ulcers."

The more we think about other people in such terms, the easier it is to excuse our own behavior. We can pride ourselves on having the honesty to be true to our lack of convictions. We can also practice the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in reverse. On those rare occasions when we do go to church, we can pray to God, saying:

"I thank thee, Lord, that I am not as other men, a hypocrite, a phony, a straight-laced killjoy, or even like that deacon over there."

Another side to following this third step consists in striving as hard as you can to prove that you are not a pious goody-goody. Make a point of garnishing your conversation with a liberal sprinkling of four-letter words. Throw them in even when they do not fit the context of your remarks. Show yourself to be conversant with whatever novels cannot be read in Boston. Or if your taste does not rise to that level, get yourself one of those naughty calendars and hang it up in a conspicuous location. Make it a point of discussing local scandals in a matter-of-fact sort of way, not maliciously or with too much enthusiasm, but with a sort of bored tolerance. When the minister comes to call, offer him a glass of gin and tell him the latest story about the traveling salesman.

All the while that you undertake these three basic steps it is wise to cultivate a powerful feeling of moral pessimism. Bear in mind that all human striving after righteousness is shot through with conceit and self-assertion. Admonish yourself with the warning that even to try to be better than you are is presumptuous. Remember that any attempt to lay down a few rules of living is likely to get you trapped in a legalistic way of thinking. And that is the worst thing that can happen to anybody. Finally, con-

vince yourself that since the world is going to the dogs anyway, you might as well gnaw a few stolen bones while time allows.

That, then, is my formula for succeeding in iniquity without really sinning. I could recommend a good many other steps, but those are enough for a start. They have the virtue of removing all sense of personal responsibility and of confusing all the issues. If you follow these steps carefully you can live with a clear conscience. In fact, you can do something even better. You can live without any conscience at all.