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SECTION ONE

FREEDOM NOW FROM THE BONDS OF SIN

CHAPTERS 1-7

THE LAW AND THE LAW OF LOVE

The question before us is what the Christian life, true spirituality, really is, and how it may be lived in a twentieth-century setting.

The first point that we must make is that it is impossible even to begin living the Christian life, or to know anything of true spirituality, before one is a Christian. And the only way to become a Christian is neither by trying to live some sort of a Christian life nor by hoping for some sort of religious experience, but rather by accepting Christ as Savior. No matter how complicated, educated, or sophisticated we may be, or how simple we may be, we must all come the same way, insofar as becoming a Christian is concerned. As the kings of the earth and the mighty of the earth are born in exactly the same way, physically, as the simplest man, so the most intellectual person must become a Christian in exactly the same way as the simplest person. This is true for all men everywhere, through all space and all time. There are no exceptions. Jesus said a totally exclusive word: “No man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

The reason for this is that all men are separated from God because of their true moral guilt. God exists, God has a character, God is a holy God; and when men sin (and we all must acknowledge we have sinned not only by mistake but by intention), they have true moral guilt before the God who exists. That guilt is not just the modern concept of guilt-feelings, a psychological guilty feeling in man. It is a true moral guilt before the infinite-personal, holy God. Only the finished, substitutionary work of Christ upon the cross as the Lamb of God—in history, space, and time—is enough to remove this. Our true guilt, that brazen heaven which stands between us and God, can be removed only upon the basis of the finished work of Christ *plus nothing* on our part. The Bible’s whole emphasis is that there must be no humanistic note added at any point in the accepting of the gospel. It is the infinite value of the finished work of Christ, the second person of the Trinity, upon the cross *plus nothing* that is the sole basis for the removal of

our guilt. When we thus come, believing God, the Bible says we are declared justified by God, the guilt is gone, and we are returned to fellowship with God—the very thing for which we were created in the first place.

Just as the only *basis* for the removal of our guilt is the finished work of Christ upon the cross in history, plus nothing, so the only *instrument* for accepting that finished work of Christ upon the cross is faith. This is not faith in the twentieth-century or Kierkegaardian concept of faith as a jump in the dark—not a solution on the basis of faith in faith. It is believing the specific promises of God; no longer turning our backs on them, no longer calling God a liar, but raising the empty hands of faith and accepting that finished work of Christ as it was fulfilled in history upon the cross. The Bible says that at that moment we pass from death to life, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear Son. We become, individually, children of God. We are children of God from that time on. I repeat, there is no way to begin the Christian life except through the door of spiritual birth, any more than there is any other way to begin physical life except through the door of physical birth.

Yet, having said this about the beginning of the Christian life, we must also realize that while the new birth is necessary as the beginning, it is only the beginning. We must not think that because we have accepted Christ as Savior and are therefore Christians, this is all there is in the Christian life. In one way physical birth is the most important part in our physical life, because we are not alive in the external world until we have been born. In another way, however, it is the least important of all the aspects of our life, because it is only the beginning and then it is past. After we are born, the important thing is the living of our life in all its relationships, possibilities, and capabilities. It is exactly the same with the new birth. In one way, the new birth is the most important thing in our spiritual life, because we are not Christians until we have come this way. In another way, however, *after* one has become a Christian, it must be minimized, in that we should not always have our mind only on our new birth. The important thing after being born spiritually is to live. There is a new birth, and *then* there is the Christian life to be lived. This is the area of sanctification, from the time of the new birth through this present life, until Jesus comes or until we die.

Often, after a person is born again and asks, "What shall I do next?" he is given a list of things, usually of a limited nature and primarily negative. Often he is given the idea that if he does not do this series of things (whatever this series of things happens to be in the particular country and location

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and at the time he happens to live), he will be spiritual. This is not so. The true Christian life, *true spirituality*, is not merely a negative not-doing of any small list of things. Even if the list began as a very excellent list of things to beware of in that particular historic setting, we still must emphasize that the Christian life, or true spirituality, is more than refraining from a certain list of external taboos in a mechanical way.

Because this is true, there almost always comes into being another group of Christians that rises up and begins to work against such a list of taboos; thus, there is a tendency toward a struggle in Christian circles between those who set up a certain list of taboos and those who, feeling there is something wrong with this, say, "Away with all taboos, away with all lists." Both of these groups can be right and both can be wrong, depending on how they approach the matter.

I was impressed by this on one Saturday night at L'Abri, when we were having one of our discussion times. On that particular night everybody present was a Christian, many of them from groups in countries where "lists" had been very much accentuated. They began to talk against the use of taboos, and at first as I listened to them I rather agreed with them, in the direction they were going. But as I listened further to this conversation, and as they spoke against the taboos in their own countries, it became quite clear to me that what they really wanted was merely to be able to do the things that the taboos were against. What they really wanted was a more lax Christian life. But we must see that in giving up such lists, in feeling the limitation of the "list" mentality, we must not do this merely in order to be able to live a looser life; it must be for something deeper. So I think both sides of this discussion can be right and both sides can be wrong. We do not come to true spirituality or the true Christian life merely by keeping a list, but neither do we come to it merely by rejecting the list and then shrugging our shoulders and living a looser life.

If we are considering outward things in relation to true spirituality, we are face-to-face not with some small list, but with the whole Ten Commandments and all of God's other commands. In other words, if I see the list as a screen, and I say this small list is trite, dead, and cheap, and I take hold of the screen and lift it away, then I am not face-to-face with a looser thing; I am face-to-face with the whole Ten Commandments and all that is included in them. I am also face-to-face with what we might call the Law of Love, the fact that I am to love God and I am to love my fellowman.

In the book of Romans, in the fourteenth chapter, verse fifteen, we read:

“But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.” This is the law of God. In a very real sense there is no liberty here. It is an absolute declaration that we are to do this. It is perfectly true that we cannot be saved by doing this, we cannot do this in our own strength, and none of us do this perfectly in this life. Nevertheless, it is an imperative. It is the absolute command of God. The same thing is true in 1 Corinthians 8:12-13: “But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.” Therefore, when I take hold of the screen of a trite list and say, “This is too superficial,” and I push it aside, I must see what I am doing. I am not now confronted with a libertine concept, but I am confronted with the whole Ten Commandments and with the Law of Love. So even if we are dealing only with *outward* commands, we have not moved into a looser life; we have moved into something much more profound and heart-searching. As a matter of fact, when we are done with our honest wrestling before God, very often we will find that we will be observing at least some of the taboos on these lists. But having gone deeper, we find that we will be observing them for a completely different reason. Curiously enough we often come around in a circle through our liberty, through the study of the deeper teaching, and find we do want to keep these things. But now *not* for the same reason—that of social pressure. It is no longer merely a matter of holding to an accepted list in order that Christians will think well of us.

However, eventually the Christian life and true spirituality are not to be seen as outward at all, but *inward*. The climax of the Ten Commandments is the tenth commandment in Exodus 20:17: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor’s.” The commandment not to covet is an entirely inward thing. Coveting is never an outward thing, from the very nature of the case. It is an intriguing factor that this is the last command that God gives us in the Ten Commandments and thus the hub of the whole matter. The end of the whole thing is that we arrive at an inward situation and not merely an outward one. Actually, we break this last commandment, not to covet, before we break any of the others. Any time that we break one of the other commandments of God, it means that we have already broken this commandment in coveting. It also means that any time we break one of the others, we break this last commandment as well. So no matter which of the other Ten

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Commandments you break, you break two: the commandment itself, and this commandment not to covet. This is the hub of the wheel.

In Romans 7:7-9, Paul states very clearly that this was the commandment which gave him a sense of being sinful:

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.

Now he did not mean he was perfect before; this is clear from what Paul has said. What he is saying here is, “I did not know I was a sinner; I thought I would come out all right, because I was keeping these outward things and was getting along all right in comparison with other people.” He would have been measuring himself against the externalized form of the commandments that the Jews had in their tradition. But when he opened the Ten Commandments and read that the last commandment was not to covet, he saw he was a sinner. When did this take place? He does not tell us, but personally I feel that God was working inwardly in him and making him feel this lack even before the experience on the Damascus road—that already he had seen he was a sinner and had been troubled in the light of the tenth commandment—and then Christ spoke to him.

Coveting is the negative side of the positive commands, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. . . . [And] thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:37, 39).

Love is internal, not external. There can be external manifestations, but love itself will always be an internal factor. Coveting is always internal; the external manifestation is a result. We must see that to love God with all the heart, mind, and soul is not to covet against God; and to love man, to love our neighbor as ourselves, is not to covet against man. When I do not love the Lord as I should, I am coveting against the Lord. And when I do not love my neighbor as I should, I am coveting against him.

“Thou shalt not covet” is the internal commandment that shows the man who thinks himself to be moral that he really needs a Savior. The average such “moral” man, who has lived comparing himself to other men

and comparing himself to a rather easy list of rules (even if they cause him some pain and difficulty), can feel, like Paul, that he is getting along all right. But suddenly, when he is confronted with the inward command not to covet, he is brought to his knees. It is exactly the same with us as Christians. This is a very central concept if we are to have any understanding or any real practice of the true Christian life or true spirituality. I can take lists that men make and I can seem to keep them, but to do that, my heart does not have to be bowed. But when I come to the inward aspect of the Ten Commandments, when I come to the inward aspect of the Law of Love, if I am listening even in a poor fashion to the direction of the Holy Spirit, I can no longer feel proud. I am brought to my knees. In this life I can never say, "I have arrived; it is finished; look at me—I am holy." When we talk of the Christian life or true spirituality, when we talk about freedom from the bonds of sin, we must be wrestling with the inward problems of not coveting against God and men, of loving God and men, and not merely some set of externals.

This immediately raises a question. Does this mean that *any* desire is coveting and therefore sinful? The Bible makes plain that this is not so—all desire is not sin. So then the question arises, when does proper desire become coveting? I think we can put the answer down simply: desire becomes sin when it fails to include love of God or men. Further, I think there are two practical tests as to when we are coveting against God or men; first, I am to love God enough to be contented; second, I am to love men enough not to envy.

Let us pursue these two tests. First, in regard to God: I am to love God enough to be contented, because otherwise even our natural and proper desires bring us into revolt against God. God has made us with proper desires, but if there is not a proper contentment on my part, to this extent I am in revolt against God, and of course revolt is the whole central problem of sin. When I lack proper contentment, either I have forgotten that God is God, or I have ceased to be submissive to him. We are now speaking about a practical test to judge if we are coveting against God. A quiet disposition and a heart giving thanks at any given moment is the real test of the extent to which we love God at that moment. I would like to give some strong words to you from the Bible to remind us that this is God's own standard for Christians: "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient; but rather giving of thanks" (Ephesians 5:3-4).

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Thus, the “giving of thanks” is in contrast to the whole, black list that stands above. In Ephesians 5:20 it is even stronger: “Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” How inclusive are the “all things” for which we are to give thanks? These same “all things” are also mentioned in the book of Romans: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (8:28). This is not a kind of magic—the infinite-personal God promises that he will work all things together for the Christian’s good.

Here I am told that if I am a true Christian, “all things” work together for my good. It is not all things except the sorrow; it is not all things except the battle. We throw the words “all things” in Romans 8:28 around *all things*. We do honor to God and the finished work of Christ as we throw that circle around the whole; *all things* work together for good to those “who love God,” for those “who are the called according to his purpose.” But to the extent to which we properly throw the term “all things” around all things, it carries with it also the “all things” of Ephesians 5:20: “Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father. . . .” We cannot separate these two. The “all things” of Ephesians 5:20 is as wide as the “all things” of Romans 8:28. It must be giving of thanks for *all things*—this is God’s standard.

Philippians deals with this also. In Philippians 4:6 we read, “Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.”

“Be careful for nothing” here means: Do not be overcome by care in anything, by worry in anything, but rather “by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.” Of course, this is a statement concerning prayer in contrast to the worry, but at the same time it carries with it the direct command to thank God in the midst of the prayer for the “everything.” Or we may note Colossians 2:7: “Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.” You will notice this is linked to the sixth verse: “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.” What does it mean to walk in Christ? It is to be “rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith.” (And there are many of us who think this is *by* faith; the *instrument* to do this is faith) “Abounding therein with thanksgiving”; the final note is on the thanksgiving.

Then we find in Colossians 3:15: “And let the peace of God rule in your

hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.” And verse 17: “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.” And again in Colossians 4:2: “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving.”

These words about thanksgiving are, in one sense, hard words. They are beautiful, but they do not give us any room to move—the “all things” includes *all things*.

We read in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” And this is linked to the next verse, verse 19: “Quench not the Spirit.” Surely one thing is clear. God says to us: in *everything* give thanks.

I think we can see all this in its proper perspective if we go back to Romans 1:21: “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” This is the central point: They were not thankful. Instead of giving thanks they “became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. The beginning of man’s rebellion against God was, and is, the lack of a thankful heart. They did not have proper, thankful hearts—seeing themselves as creatures before the Creator and being bowed not only in their knees, but in their stubborn hearts. The rebellion is a deliberate refusal to be the creature before the Creator, to the extent of being thankful. Love must carry with it a “thank-you,” not in a superficial or “official” way, but in being thankful and saying in the mind or with the voice “Thank you” to God. As we shall see later, this is not to be confused with failing to stand against what is cruel in the world as it now is, but it *does* mean having a thankful heart toward the God who is there.

Two things are immediately involved here, if we are to see this in the Christian framework rather than in a non-Christian one. The first is that as Christians we say we live in a *personal universe*, in the sense that it was created by a personal God. Now that we have accepted Christ as our Savior, God the Father is our Father. When we say we live in a *personal universe* and God the Father is our Father, to the extent that we have less than a trusting attitude we are denying what we say we believe. We say that, as Christians, we have by choice taken the place of creatures before the Creator, but as we show a lack of trust, we are exhibiting that *at that moment*, in practice, we have not really so chosen.

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The second thing we must comprehend in order to understand a contented heart in the Christian framework, rather than in a non-Christian one, is illustrated by Camus's dilemma in *The Plague*. As Christians we say we live in a *supernatural universe* and that there is a battle, since the fall of man, and that this battle is in both the seen world and the unseen world. This is what we say we believe; we insist on this against the naturalists and against the anti-supernaturalists. If we really believe this, first, we can be contented and yet fight evil, and second, surely it is God's right to put us as Christians where he judges best in the battle.

In a Christian understanding of contentment, we must see contentment in relation to these things. To summarize, there is a *personal* God. He is my Father since I have accepted Christ as my Savior. Then surely when I lack trust, I am denying what I say I believe. At the same time, I say there is a battle in the universe, and God *is* God. Then, if I lack trust, what I am really doing is denying in practice that he has a right, as my God, to use me where he wants in the spiritual battle that exists in the seen and the unseen world. The trust and contentment must be in the Christian framework, but in the proper framework the contentment is deeply important.

If the contentment goes and the giving of thanks goes, we are not loving God as we should, and proper desire has become coveting against God. This inward area is the first place of loss of true spirituality. The outward is always just a result of it.

The second test as to when proper desire becomes coveting is that we should love men enough not to envy, and this is not only envy for money; it is for everything. It can, for instance, be envy of his spiritual gifts. There is a simple test for this. Natural desires have become coveting against a fellow creature, one of our kind, a fellow man, when we have a mentality that would give us secret satisfaction at his misfortune. If a man has something, and he loses it, do we have an inward pleasure? A secret satisfaction at his loss? Do not speak too quickly and say it is never so, because you will make yourself a liar. We must all admit that even when we get on in our Christian life, even in these areas where we say we are longing for the church of Jesus Christ to be more alive in our generation, often we have this awful secret satisfaction at the loss of other men, even at the loss of brothers in Christ. Now if this mentality is upon me, in any way, then my natural desires have become coveting. I am inwardly coveting, and I am not loving men as I should.

Inward coveting—lack of love toward men—soon tends to spill over into the external world. It cannot be kept in the internal world completely.

This occurs in various degrees. When I have a wrong regret that others have what I do not possess, and this regret is allowed to grow, very quickly it comes to make me dislike the person himself. Surely we all have felt this. As the Holy Spirit makes us increasingly honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that often we have a dislike of a person because we have had wrong desire toward something of his. More than this, if I would be happy if he were to lose something, the next step in the external world is moving either subtly or more openly to cause him to have the loss, either in lying about him, stealing from him, or whatever it may be.

In 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 I am told that my longing in love should be to seek for the other man's good and not just my own: "All things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth." And the same is true in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5: "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own. . . ."

When we read these things and understand that failure in these areas is really coveting, a lack of love, every one of us must be upon his knees as Paul was upon his knees when he saw the commandment not to covet; it destroys any superficial view of the Christian life.

These are the areas of true spirituality. These are the areas of true Christian living. They are not basically external; they are internal, they are deep; they go down into the areas of our lives we like to hide from ourselves. The inward area is the first place of loss of true Christian life, of true spirituality, and the outward sinful act is the result. If we can only get hold of this—that the internal is the basic, the external is always merely the result—it will be a tremendous starting place.

However, true spirituality, the Christian life, is even one step beyond this. So far we have moved from the concept of a small, limited list of things to the whole Ten Commandments and the whole Law of Love. And then we have moved from the external to the internal. But in both of these cases we have dealt largely with that which is negative. But true spirituality, the Christian life, is deeper than even a profound concept of a proper negative. True spirituality, the true Christian life, is finally positive. We have touched on this in "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). But let us now especially emphasize that true spirituality, that true Christian life, is not even simply the proper negative in the deepest realms of our being. There is a biblical negative and then a positive.

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As this study goes on, we shall deal more extensively with the following passages, but let us look at them quickly at this stage. Romans 6:4 is a biblical negative (and the tenses I read are the tenses as they are in Greek rather than the way they are translated in our King James translation): “Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death.” This is a negative. We were buried with him by baptism into death. We find the same thing in the first part of the sixth verse: “Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him.” When I accepted Christ as Savior, when God as Judge declared me justified, these things became legally true. My call in the Christian life is to see them become true in my life in practice. In Galatians 2:20 we find the same thing with a negative emphasis: “I have been crucified with Christ.”

These negatives must never be overlooked, either in justification or the Christian life, or we will not be able to understand the following positives. In Galatians 6:14 we have this word: “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom [or whereby] the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” This is a tremendously strong negative. And this is not to be just a theoretical proposition; it is to be (as we shall see later) practiced, by the grace of God. There is a place, therefore, for a true biblical negative. But now let us go on and notice that the Christian life, true spirituality, does not stop with this negative. There is a positive.

So in Galatians 2:20 again, “I am crucified with Christ.” Then there comes a break in the verse. In my own Bible I have marked it with two little lines, so that the break would be strongly apparent to me, even in a quick reading: “I have been crucified with Christ: [break] nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” So although there is a negative, it swept over into a positive, and to stop at the negative is to miss the whole point. The true Christian life is not an external life, or thought-life, of basic negatives; it is not hating life, in the way that we are apt to do when we get into despondency or other psychological problems. The Christian negative is not a nihilist negative—there is a true biblical negative—but the Christian life does not stop with a negative. There is a true life in the present as well as in the future.

In the book of Romans we feel the same force (6:4): “Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” This is the way it should be read: that “we *may* walk in newness

of life.” This is it; there is a positive. There is a possibility of walking in newness of life in the present life, right now, between the new birth and our death, or the second coming of Jesus. In Romans 6:6 it is the same: “Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, in order that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.” So we died with Christ, but we rose with Christ. That is the emphasis. Christ’s death is a historic fact in the past, and we will be raised from the dead in future history, but there is to be a positive exhibition in present history, now, before our future resurrection. As an illustration, we read the negative in Galatians 5:15: “But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.” He is talking of Christians. This is a negative. But there is a positive (verse 14): “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” And there is also a positive in verses 22 and 23 of the same chapter: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” So the context leads us from the negative to the positive in our considerations of the Christian life.

In summary then, of this chapter, which is an introduction to all that follows:

1. The true Christian life, true spirituality, does not *just* mean that we have been born again. It must begin there, but it means much more than that. It does not mean only that we are going to be in heaven. It does mean that, but it means much more than that. The true Christian life, true spirituality in the present life, means more than being justified and knowing that I am going to heaven.
2. It is not just a desire to get rid of taboos in order to live an easier and a looser life. Our desire must be for a deeper life. And when I begin to think of this, the Bible presents to me the whole of the Ten Commandments and the whole of the Law of Love.
3. True spirituality, the true Christian life, is not just outward, but it is inward—it is not to covet against God and men.
4. But it is even more than this: it is positive—positive in inward reality, and then positive in outward results. The inward thing is to be positive and not just negative; and then sweeping out of the inward

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positive reality, there is to be a positive manifestation externally. It is not just that we are dead to certain things, but we are to love God, we are to be alive to him, we are to be in communion with him, *in this present moment of history*. And we are to love men, to be alive to men as men, and to be in communication on a true personal level with men, *in this present moment of history*.

When I speak of the Christian life, or freedom from the bonds of sin, or of true spirituality, the four points listed above are what the Bible says we should mean, and anything less than this is trifling with God—trifling with him who created the world, and trifling also with him who died on the cross. This is what we are to have in mind when we begin such a study; otherwise, there is no use even beginning to talk about experiential freedom from the bonds of sin or about an experiential reality of the Christian life, of true spirituality. If this is not in our minds, at least in some poor comprehension and at least in some poor aspiration, we might as well stop. Anything else is trifling with God, and because it is trifling with God, it is sin.