



L'Abri Papers #SSM01



Creativity: My Thinking Choosing and Acting Counts

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“... we are not puppets, and our very make-up is that our choice has meaning and it matters to live our life that way.”

As we think of any part of our lives as Christians - loving our neighbour, or taking care of our families, or witnessing to the non-Christian - all of these ideas or relationships - we have to start off with ourselves, always. Even when I'm thinking about marriage, about two people, in the end I stand before God *alone*. And *I* live my life, however long it's going to be; I'm responsible for my own life.

Remember that Jesus said to the people, when they kept criticizing the person next to them, “Don't look for the straw in your neighbour's eye; look for the beam in your own eye.” As we read the Bible, thinking about the truth which God gives us, thinking about his law and about those things which are right, it's easy (perhaps the easiest thing of all) to worry about the next person and to take responsibility for somebody else. This is very often the trouble in marriage, and between parents and children, and between friends, and among people we work with; that is, that people we work with are always looking at us in a critical way and through this sort of veil, and we feel this, and we think, “Oh, I'm not as good, not as strong, not as nice, not as generous as this other person would like me to be, or as *I* would like to be.” And of course we criticize ourselves, too, we let ourselves down, we're very disappointed in ourselves. Now Jesus quite firmly kept saying to us, “First of all your responsibility is yourself.” We're not supposed to be judging the next person. And the next thing we're not supposed to be is the Holy Spirit for the next person. That's not our job, to wonder whether the next person is becoming kinder, more patient; that is not our concern. My concern in life is “me,” Susan; each one of us is alone in our relationship and responsibility before God.

The Biblical view of who I am as a person is totally different from the view around us in the 20th Century. When we go and have coffee with our friends - just the ordinary relationships - we have to understand that the way we're looking at ourselves is totally different from the way our friends and other people are looking at us. They do not know who the human being is; they do not know that we are persons created in the image of God. Now this means we're not going to have to achieve a status in order to have worth. You notice today that people determine your importance by your salary, how much education you've had and how high up the ladder you get; these sorts of things are terribly important. And people say to their children, “You *must*, you *must* work hard because I want you to

succeed, I want you to win, I want you to be a *top* person.” But as we look at the Bible, our whole sense of values gets turned totally upside down. I think about my life ... “I have worth and value before God; He has accepted me because of who He’s made me to be.” The beauty, the excitement of being a human being in God’s eyes isn’t altered by whether I earn 2000 dollars a year in some third world country or whether I’m earning 35 or 40 thousand dollars a year and I’m very well-off. It doesn’t make one little bit of difference to God about my status.

Another thing that doesn’t make any difference before God is a person’s sex. There is no top person and no bottom person before God because of whether we’re male or female, or whether we’re Jew or Greek, black or white, whatever; these secondary things don’t come in before God. Neither does our intelligence. Recently, in the last two or three years, there has been an increasing sense in medical ethics that if a baby’s born and perhaps it’s going to have Down’s Syndrome, or is not going to be as clever as you or I, that maybe this person doesn’t even have a right to live, that this person has no value, that somehow we check in as valuable people at a certain IQ level. This means nothing to God; He said, “Let the children come unto me, because of such is the kingdom of God.” This is a human being who is, in a sense, an example to us, not the other way around.

So we can come before God with a sense of tremendous relaxation. We don’t have to pretend to be better - first of all, He knows we’re sinful and we’ve failed, and He’s accepted us the way we are - and we don’t have to invent things for ourselves - play little games and pretend. We can be relaxed just the way we see little children running around the yard ... they rush in and they’ve got chocolate ice-cream on their faces and they’ve got mud ‘cause they fell in the pond ... and they know that they’re loved and forgiven. This is our strong position before God. Therefore, we’re not living to sort of tick things off on some sort of scale and be accepted.

Now one thing some Christians have gotten sort of mixed up on is thinking that God, being a spirit, is more pleased if we live our lives in a “spiritual” way. That is, “If I go to two or three prayer meetings a week and two Bible studies and rush around - perhaps on my two free afternoons I’m down on some street corner witnessing - I will really please God a lot.” “If going to church once on Sunday is quite a good idea, then perhaps going three times on Sunday will make God extremely happy.” And we get like little children who are trying to earn gold stars. We keep falling back into this mentality; we keep thinking God wants something “other worldly” from us.

Now in fact, if we’ll just sit back and look at it for a minute, we can think “Now God planned us to be creatures of this planet; that was His intention.” If I try to run away from who I want to be, say, if I love rushing around the lawn with bare feet, or going to the seaside, or throwing myself into music and I think, “Oh *dear*, I mustn’t do this, this isn’t very spiritual,” then I’m negating who God made me to be, and it’s a slap in His face because He wanted me to enjoy the seaside and music; He made me to enjoy a sexual relationship in marriage; He made us to joy in having small children, or a dish of ice cream with a piece of chocolate in it; whatever scale of things we think of as human beings, these are good gifts from God, and they’re part of the unity of “who I am.” I’m woven together like a piece of cloth, and God said it was very good, the wholeness of myself.

Now part of this is to have a relationship with God and to grow in the knowledge of his truth, but He tied me down to this planet, and not only did He tie me down, but the Bible says that when I die, I’m going to be left for just a little while, and then I’ll be raised again, so for eternity I’ll have this link. And this is not “just a lump of clay,” the way some people have said “death is a release” - not at all; this is a gift of God, this is planned, this is

creation. And so, as I think about my life as a person, what I am working towards is a unity within myself, who am I.

Now “who am I” is slightly different for each one of us, because we’ve been made differently, and there isn’t any rubber stamp Christian, there isn’t such a thing as a “spiritual person” that I should copy. What I should look for is who am I, now, because who I am now is very different from who I was 20 years ago when I was 20 years old and first married. Who am I now is different from who I was even five years ago - I know that for a fact; I’ve changed quite a bit in my ideas, in a lot of things that I understand. So I’m not even static, and I must have this self-understanding to know peace in life. We in the 20th Century pant after peace. And we live in a most frantic generation where there is often no peace, no self-understanding, no sense of unity or sense of rest. We as Christians should know this better than other people. Although the sad fact is that often we don’t. We’re going to work at this for a long time, and we’re limited, and we’re never going to have the perfect situation, so we won’t reach a real unity like this ‘til we’re raised again from the dead and in the next step of our lives. But we work towards it, and the Holy Spirit who is in us will help us work towards this self-understanding, this unity. It’s all linked up with the ordinary things.

Now you can have someone say, “I feel depressed.” There can be various reasons; perhaps after ten minutes of conversation, you find out that someone loved very dearly by the person has just contracted a very serious illness; or they will be no longer able to rent their house, and they don’t have money for anything that’s on the market in the area; and you find that there’s a very good explanation for this depression. Now you could have a “Christian” answer ... “If you’ll just pray about this and trust in the Lord, then your fears, your low times, will disappear; you’re not being spiritual” And I say, “Rubbish!” If someone you love very, very dearly has contracted a serious illness, or you suddenly realize that you’re going to be homeless and you don’t have any money to go anywhere else, you have every reason to feel sad and depressed. And in fact, if you don’t allow yourself to feel this, you’re creating a tension ... you’re denying the reality inside of yourself. Now we know this, for instance, from the last war; the people who had the most serious, permanent psychological damage when they went through a difficult experience were the ones who couldn’t cry, couldn’t grieve, couldn’t say “how terrible it was,” could not face the reality of what was inside.

Often Christians have been brainwashed into thinking that they must act, must seem, both to themselves and to others, as if everything was always okay, and joy-joy-joy, happy-happy-happy; or that they are going to be on their knees all day long, that they’re not going to get hungry or want to go for a long walk, or do this or that; they’re trying to pretend they’re somebody they’re not, and that’s a kind of dishonesty. When I’m dishonest with myself, that’s going to have very serious consequences. I’m going to put a tremendous tension inside myself; I won’t understand myself; I’ll be creating all sorts of disunity, or “unpeace.” We have no need of this. First of all, we do live in an abnormal world, and each one of us has problems both outside and inside; we all share in this. Second, we don’t walk through this alone. This is what “walk the gospel” means, and that is, “I have come to you in your real life, when you’re very discouraged, you’re very upset and you feel as if you want endless amounts of sleeping tablets because you’ve turned and tossed for the last twenty nights, where you’re not sure how you’re going to go on.” This is where God comes to us. It’s the crunch. It’s reality. You can say, “Yes, I am depressed, yes I am very sad, yes, I am tempted, I’m afraid,” and be able to admit how you really are. Or, “No, I’m *not* going to church fifteen times; I’m going to decide on my priorities, but I’m not going to deny

other things about the way God has made me. These are also good, these are also necessary, this is who I *am*”.

Now, I’m not saying that every little thing we find inside ourselves, every little grain, has to be fulfilled, because obviously it can’t be; our life is something like the frame of a picture, defining our limitations. For instance, we’re all born with all sorts, of possibilities and we could grow this way and that way, and be fulfilled in all sorts of different areas, and we *aren’t*. Each of us could live out maybe six lives which would be very interesting and very fulfilling out of the seeds of possibilities which are in us. We may have different combinations of gifts. But the years are short. The responsibilities are great, and so we are limited in what we can actually do. This is sometimes a little disappointing if we think, “Oh, I *could* do this, this, and this.” But I can’t. God has only made me *one*. And this is what I’m talking about ... I’m talking about the “me.” I have to accept this limitation; I have to accept that the years I’m young and strong are short. This is almost a paranoia today; people can’t admit that they’re going to get old, that they’re going to get tired; we have a sort of “myth of youth,” and we hang on to this, turning away from reality again, the reality of the fallen world, which is a limitation. If I choose to get married, I’m going to be very limited in some areas; there are some things I could’ve done as a single person, for myself and for others, that are now closed off to me. On the other hand, if I’m single, there are other things that are cut off to me that I could’ve had if I’d been married. Each one of these things becomes part of our picture. We’re limited by our physical energies. We think, “I *would* do this, I *would* do that, but I’m unable. There are only 24 hours in a day, and, unfortunately, I need so many hours of sleep, and I *can’t* do it.”

Some people live their lives like little birds, always fluttering on the edge of that limitation and are always discontented. “If only the sun had shown today, then it would’ve been a great day,” or, “if only I had gone to college or “if only I didn’t have this bad foot,” or “if only I had lived in another country,” or “if only I could write,” or maybe “I *could* write but I never had time to sit down and do anything about it.” And they’re always pushing against the edge of that. Now it causes trouble as soon as they get married or have a job or child or any sort of responsibility, because this is also dissatisfying. “If only the person I married was a little bit different”; “if only my job gave me slightly more scope, or the people were more sympathetic, or perhaps I had more money ... “

This being content and being creative *inside* of our limitations is, I think, the secret in life. First we have the base of who we are and the knowledge of who we are, so we understand what the whole framework is, and we know where we’re going.

Second, we have the idea of this limitation not being some sort of a prison, but a boundary inside of which I’m going to be creative, and I often tell this story, but I think it’s very appropriate. Say, you’ve planned a Youth Hostelling vacation, and you save up for it, and you say, “After I’ve been at L’Abri, I’m going to go off for a month, and it’s very important to you. You may never get back to England again, and you’ve planned all these things, and you go off, and as soon as you get out there, the sun stops shining, and the birds stop singing, and we’ve got a month of rain I’m sorry, but it’s all too possible.

It’s rainy, and it’s windy, and it’s cold. Now you can have two reactions: You can be the person that lets that ruin his whole time ... or her whole time. You may say, “Oh, I had a lousy time Youth Hostelling, it was awful, rainy and wet ... The whole time was ruined.” And you’ve allowed this, the framework of what actually was, not like the travel brochure where the Lake District sun always shines - though, in fact, it hardly ever does - but you’ve had this idea, and you’ve been unable to accept the reality. And then you have another person who may go out and find it’s rainy and say, “Well, we’ll go to the town, we’ll go

and look at Bath, and they go and look at the architecture, and they enjoy something slightly different. And they make capital of it. It's as if they have something, and they spend it wisely; they're creative with what they have, and they're able to enjoy it. They're able to change and be flexible. And that, to me, is the secret of life.

You say, right now I'd rather be married; how are you going to be creative in being single? Or say a person is married and says, "Oh, what a terrible mistake I made in marrying this wretched person. I'd rather be single - look at those lucky people who are single. And then you say, "But here I am. This is my framework, and I will be creative in this." Now we have God's help, and it's a very ordinary thing; and yet, if you look for it in the Bible, you'll see that that is often given as the reality. And it makes for contentment, it makes for happiness, but it also makes for a tremendous creativity. The most creative cooking in the world came from people who couldn't go down to the local supermarket and get every last ingredient that was in a cook book. And so, for instance, you get your pizza from Italy _ where some people had very limited resources, and they made the best of what they had. The same with Chinese cooking, so you have a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Now your most creative lives are made that same way. Take the ingredients of what I've got today, not tomorrow, or next month - from *now* and make the best of those, work with those. And that's very exciting and interesting, and you make the most of it. It's like taking the bull by the horns. Instead of sort of cowering under life - it's embracing, it's getting on top of it and thinking about it _ and we won't always feel that way - we very often feel squashed, we feel crushed, and we feel as if a big rock has landed on us, and we are flattened underneath circumstances which are limiting us. I can't move, I can't do anything about it. Now there are certain things we can do so that we don't get into this rather miserable situation - or the equally miserable one of getting into a rut so deep that I cannot again, be creative at all _ like some muddy road that wagons have gone down for months, and then your wagon gets in those ruts, and you just can't move, and you're not being creative in any way.

Because God made us - the theology of this and the philosophy of this is that we live in a structured universe. God is infinite, and there's not any *chance*, but, on the other hand, we are not puppets, and our very makeup is that our choice has meaning, and it matters to live our life that way. It matters not to just feel as if I'm squashed by events, but that I look at it, and I accept limitations, my own limitations. "Oh, I'm not so clever as I would like to be. No, I'm not, perhaps, as resilient emotionally as I would like to be." "No, I'm not so good at personal relationships as I would have imagined, but I will accept who I am and I will work with that." I work with what I have here. Jesus said, "Don't just be hearers of the word, but doers." Now it's easy to keep all that we read in a nice little Spiritual compartment and not to ever start putting it into practice in my own nitty gritty daily life.

Now what is the nitty gritty? - Well, first of all, I've got a big secret - it is this relationship with God; there isn't a blue print for it. Nobody can tell you how or when or how long you should read the Bible. But we're told to grow in the knowledge of the truth, and what that means for you will be very different from what it means for me, perhaps. What it means at one point in your life may be very different from what it means at another, but this is our bread, this is our meat. Just as much as we're tied down to planet Earth physically, so, if we want to have a sense of unity find well-being, we're also tied down to this "good nutrition." Ranald preached a sermon once that I liked very much where he said "What are we filling ourselves up with for our spiritual nutrition? Is it junk food?" And, of course, one thinks about one's diet. It's not good to say, "I feel so awful. I feel so terrible. God hasn't been good enough to me or maybe Satan's tempting me," and, in actual fact, you're living on

Coca-Cola and potato chips - that's not going to do you any good, and there's nothing spiritual or unspiritual about it.

In the same way, we are meant to be responsible for what we put into our heads - and our use of our time. I think, having grown up in a Christian family, one of the things which is bad is the tendency to think of having a relationship with God only as a duty - to think, "Oh, I should be reading the Bible, or I should be praying" and we feel a little bit guilty. A magazine just came in, and you're reading it - about the Falklands, or something - and then it's awfully late and you think, "Oh, dear" - (it becomes guilt) - "well, then I'd better do it (read the Bible). *There*, there, now, I've read two pages, that's pretty good." That sort of thing. Now, I think we have to think about our relationship with God the way we would think about our relationship with a friend, and that is, you have to plan to have time together. The hallmark of 20th Century life is we're run off our feet. We're run off our feet the whole time we're growing up - homework is thrown at us, exams; we're rushing around here and there, earning money if you're American and you can't get grants; trying to make ends meet together, and we're dash, dash. The electric lights are on, so we get very few hours sleep; blinking television keeps us awake and is always stirring up little bits and pieces of things, and so then, I haven't got time to talk to my husband, I haven't got time to listen to my children - "What? You read a story every night? Where would you find time?" That's ridiculous! My appeal is, just sit down! You're only going to be around her~ for a few years - what on earth is worthwhile? What is really worthwhile? Because if you just let it happen to you, you're going to end up having wasted what is most precious in life - we're really in danger of selling our birthright for a mess of potage. Who wants that? Your birthright is *life*. Now it's damaged, of course, - we all are fallen, but there you've got your birthright.

Now it really matters that you have a relationship with another person. Say you have somebody that you like very much. And you never make time to be together, and you never have time to spend with each other in any way at all. What kind of a relationship is that? You say ... Oops! Ten past ten. I've got ten minutes ... there, I've done it. Now I can get back to another television program or my magazine or whatever. That's ridiculous!! Now if you're going to have a good relationship with a person, as well as with God, what you must do is think ahead. Think, "Well, now I'll finish my work, and I'll take a picnic out into the garden. Or, "It's horrible weather - we'll build a fire in the fireplace, and we'll make a pot of tea or a cup of coffee - we'll go out for a walk, and we'll spend time together." What makes me saddest is when parents say to me, "Oh, you have such a beautiful relationship with your children. I wish I did." And they act as if it's something that falls out like radioactive fallout from heaven - it fell on you, and it didn't fall on me. You have a good relationship, I don't. They don't realize that anybody can have a good relationship with anybody, practically. If you think about it, if you spend time, if you accept that other person, if you enjoy her, if you look into her eyes and find out how she is.

Now we can do this with God. And I think it's very important. Say you're working, you're rushing around at your job, you're very tired, and then your church is putting a lot of pressure on you, or maybe it's something else - or maybe you have a lot of hobbies - think ahead during the week - when you are going to sit down and relax and be with the Lord? It's very important to treat Him as if He was a friend - make a pot of tea or a cup of coffee, build a fire, sit out in the garden. Say, "I'm sorry, no, I can't do this, no, I can't do that" because you have an appointment and it's very important. Make it nice, it's a friendship, it's pleasant. Now that's not the way it'll always be. There's a moment in every relationship for an "Oh, help!" or "Quick, look!" But you're rushing along, and it's amazing what little

pithy bits of goodness you can have both in God-person relationships and in interpersonal relationships when you have the groundedness. We can't judge each other, but we can plan. Now this means a certain kind of discipline, doesn't it? Because if you're going to plan to spend time with somebody, plan to spend time with God. That means you are disciplined, and it means saying no to certain things; and it means also deciding what's top priority and saying, "I can't do everything, and this one is on the top.

Now I think, too, of another priority (and remember, now I'm thinking about myself, so I'm not thinking of all the things that God will be telling me to do as I read His word). I'm thinking about my relationship to myself (me! my responsibilities right here. I also have to have a priority of my *mind*. God has given us a mind, and it's very interesting that where people have had the word of God and started growing, they have become much more interested in thinking. After all, you only need to read this, really read it and you have an education. We are meant to use our minds, and very often if you take a person who is just rushing around and vegetating and feeling vaguely dissatisfied and miserable, he's not letting this part of himself grow. And the evangelical church hasn't had all that good a track record about this. And so, for instance, am I reading any books which are pushing me a bit or are interesting and making me grow? I'm sure I've quoted this before, but I was reading that the average American college graduate reads one book a year. Now that really knocks you over flat when you think that this is the main means of serious communication. What do we know about contemporary literature or drama? What do I know about art? What do I know, perhaps, about the Renaissance? I have so much to know - and I should be a growing person. That's part of being alive. Incidentally, it's a very good way of not getting senile - to be feeding your mind. We should go on being creative as well. Now it may be in the kitchen, it may be with drawing, it may be with bringing up children, but we should think about our creativity; that's important. Conversations are important, too, to be able to express what I'm thinking, to be able to communicate. To receive is important for me, too, because I'm not living in isolation. I stand in relationship to my neighbour, always, whoever that neighbour is. I have a responsibility to examine the principles of what I'm thinking and talking about and doing - to not be parroting. And I have a responsibility to not just turn myself into some kind of tape recorder. Now if I'm schooled, or if I'm studying at L'Abri, and I go in and listen to a tape recorder, or I go to church, or turn on the television to look at news, or I read my newspaper, I must not just accept what I'm given ever. I have a responsibility to think, to judge - is this true? is this right? Or, what's wrong about it? Where's it leading? Where has it come from? That's what I should be thinking about.

Now we have a tension today because, in a way, I live in a generation where I am told repeatedly who matters is only *you*, so we have a kind of worship cult going for the *me*. It's great to go jogging if that's what you like to do to keep fit. But there are people who live for only that. So this has to be kept in balance. It's important. Some people live only for the *unity* aspect. After all, who is looking for unity in the 20th Century? Very often it's not the Christian; very often it's people sitting in the lotus position on the floor or with their hands out trying to make their minds blank. And it's come from an eastern philosophy and not with this wonderful sense of "I know who I am and know I'm important, and I can find a unity and a peace in that way, in that reality." So here we have to be very careful, because the things we're looking for can suddenly become the centre of our lives. Understanding who I am and serving myself are only spring boards for living life. As I become involved with other people and start taking responsibilities, in fact, my eyes will be taken off myself. You find some people who are tempted to put themselves miles and miles behind and to give, give, give, serve, serve, serve, serve. And then you have other people who are always

sort of making a little circle, like a dog who's been hit in the head. Sometimes we can go round and round and round. That's not living life. It certainly isn't. So we have to find our balance or we'll make a mistake and say "Oops I've done too much for myself thinking about myself. Oh dear! Now here I am, I've left myself miles behind and I'm dry as anything, I'm empty, I'm not really even alive." And we have to look for this; this is part of the maturing. This is balance.