

The Death of the Old Life

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Last time we shared how God gives us the Holy Spirit and makes our spirits alive. He gives us the Holy Spirit because something has happened that has made it no longer necessary for him to keep the flaming sword that guards every way to the tree of life. The event that happened was simply that his justice was able to work its full way out upon us in Jesus. That's it. God took the whole human race, put that human race into Jesus, and destroyed it there. Now that his justice has worked its way out upon the sinner, the Holy Spirit and the way to the tree of life are accessible to us.

Now it seems to me it is very important to see that the only reason we can experience new birth or the Holy Spirit coming into our spirits and regenerating us -- is because all the old life was destroyed. Sometimes I don't think we really realize that that's the case -- that it's because all the old race of mankind with all its self and all its own rights were destroyed in Jesus. It's because of that, that God can actually begin a whole new race. That's why the new life is possible to us at all.

In God's eyes new life is only possible because he has destroyed all the old life. That's why we can experience the new birth at all. It's because we have all died in Jesus and all our old life of independence of God has been destroyed, that God is able to give us a new life in the Holy Spirit. So really, in a sense you could say the death comes before the new birth. Yet it is true that many of us have found ourselves in the new birth experience and have not really come into the death of the old life.

That's what I'd really like to talk about during the three quarters of an hour that we have. I think all of us see that being a Christian is not just being a moral person. It's not just being a church-goer. That is, it's not doing works that will save you. It's not just being a church person, somebody who goes to the right service and attends the right meetings.

It's not just being socially responsible. It's not just being a person who believes and accepts the world view of Christ that he has preached to the world. It's not a person that experiences gifts or miracles. A Christian is one who has received the Spirit of Jesus into himself. John 1:12: "To as many as received him, to them gave him the right to become the children of God."

Now we also looked at the kind of person that meant that you were. You remember, it was the kind of person described in 1 John 3:9. A person who had really received the Spirit of Jesus into them would be this kind of person. 1 John 3:9: "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God."

So you recognize a person who has really been born of the spirit -- not just one who attends church, not just one who accepts the Christian world view, not just one who tries to do what is best for him and the world. You recognize a Christian who is born of the spirit by the fact that he does not commit sin.

We talked a little about what that meant. It certainly doesn't mean that you never deviate from absolute right. Because of our imperfect minds, there will be times when we unintentionally deviate from absolute truth and absolute goodness. So certainly, not committing sin doesn't mean that we never unintentionally deviate from absolute right. At times you will.

Nor does it mean that you never err in excess of emotion. I think our emotions at the point of the new birth certainly are not utterly balanced and at times we will joke more than we should. I feel like Ron and I and Scott -- who were comedians before we met Jesus -- will have emotions that tend to fly off from the old joke or the old laugh too much, and we will overbalance in that direction. So, it doesn't mean that you'll never indulge in excess emotion.

It doesn't mean that you won't fall back at times through physical weariness. In other words, because of imperfect mind, and imperfect emotions, and a weakened body, we'll find that very often we'll make mistakes and we'll do things that we didn't intend to do. So that isn't sin. Sin is what is stated in James 4:17. It's stated very clearly so we really need be in no doubt of what it is: "Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

Sin is something very far from being an unintentional deviation from absolute right. Sin is a deliberate disobedience -- a conscious knowing disobedience to God's rule and God's law.

It's a knowing disobedience of the 10 Commandments, a knowing disobedience to the life that is presented in the Sermon on the Mount, a knowing disobedience to some of the marks of a Christian that are described in Paul's Epistles, a knowing disobedience to the whole example we have in Jesus' life. Sin is a conscious resistance to that will of God that is stated for us in scripture. So sin is something very concrete. It's a conscious disobedience to God's will as outlined in the gospels, and the Epistles, and the Old Testament.

Now, does this mean that a Christian never sins? "Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin." We've talked in the past a bit: does this mean you never sin, or does this mean that you just don't sin habitually?

It certainly doesn't mean anything as weak as not sinning habitually. It doesn't mean, "Oh yeah, I sin once or twice every week but not habitually. I mean, I don't sleep in every day of the week. I don't sleep in habitually. I sleep in maybe Saturday morning and maybe an odd Monday morning but not habitually." So, it doesn't mean anything as weak as "does not commit sin habitually."

But I think it's fair to see that it doesn't really mean "never sins." It means hardly ever sins. Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin. This is not the natural normal activity of a Christian who is born of God -- because the nature within him is Jesus' nature, and that nature always wants to obey God and will always obey God -- except where the imperfect mind, or the unbalanced emotions, or the weakened body that has not yet come under the daily discipline of the daily cross -- prevents the spirit of Jesus from getting out through that person. But inside, the person will always have a pure attitude of wanting to obey God.

That brings us to the problem of the death of the old life, because I think that many of us have difficulties there. We know that a Christian is one who does not commit sin and who does not disobey God knowingly. Yet we have problems inside in our own inner lives.

We come to a situation where we are due to hand an assignment in to a professor and we know we have to be honest. It says so in Ephesians 4:25. It might be good just to look at it because God's word can often speak individually to us as we look at it. Ephesians 4:25: "Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another." And we see that.

We say, "Alright, I'm a Christian. I'm a child of God and I've to put away falsehood." We haven't the assignment ready for the professor and we tell him so.

What troubles many of us is that even as we tell him, we have within us almost an unbearable strain that makes us want to tell him a lie. We tell him the truth, but inside us there's a tremendous strain -- because we don't want to face the music and we don't want to lose our reputation with this man who respects us. Even though we do obey, we find a tremendous pressure within us, a tremendous desire of the flesh that is against the desire of the spirit. That desire is deep down there and we try to rationalize it away but it's still there.

Or, we go home and the roommate is there. They've taken all of our books out and spread them all over the floor. We know we're to be patient with them, and we know that we're not to be angry with them, because if you're angry you sin, and we hold the anger in. But within us there is a tremendous strain and desire to be angry with that person, to put them in the right place.

So even though we obey God outwardly, inside we find this tremendous strain. I think many of us wonder: is this the victory in the Christian life? We're obeying -- okay, we're obeying outwardly. We're not sinning outwardly. But inside we have a tremendous battle to hold down that attitude, or that reaction, or that response, or that motive that is not in accordance with God's Spirit.

So underneath the water of the lake there is this restlessness. We feel it's there. I think you'd admit that at times you can obey God and you can be kind to the sister and say the right word to the brother but inside it's as if you didn't do it -- because the restlessness is so miserable, and the strain is so terrible, that it's almost as if you in your own heart have sinned.

Now that's one of the problems they come against -- that desire within to sin even though they don't actually sin. I think we have another problem, and it's really the problem outlined in Hebrews 12:1. It's a famous phrase that you'll recognize. In Hebrews 12:1 the writer of Hebrews is saying that we should follow the example of a great cloud of witnesses: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." "Sin which clings so closely" is translated in the King James Version as "the besetting sin."

That's the second problem that many of us Christians have: we're born of the spirit but we have a sin that we cannot get over. I don't know what it is with you. With me it was the whole question of lust and masturbation. It was that whole area. With others it's just a strong selfish ambition. With me for some time it was that. It was a strong selfish ambition that I could not get on top of. With some of us it is a pride. But it is some besetting sin that keeps catching us out.

Now, we know we're children of God as long as Jesus continues to deal with us as he told us to deal with each other. That is, he said, "You must forgive until 70 times seven." So we know we're saved. God will always forgive us as long as we're able to repent. So the problem is not that God will ever refuse to forgive us however often we commit this sin.

But don't you see that isn't the problem? The problem is deeper than that. The problem is that the more that we commit this sin day after day, or week after week, or month after month, the more we attempt to excuse it -- the more we attempt to rationalize it -- and the more we try to persuade ourselves, "This is just my personality. This is just a normal human trait that I have."

I think that's the real danger here. The danger is not that God is not willing to forgive us. I think a lot of us are concerned, "Well, am I really a child of God if I do sin? Say I do continue in a sin maybe ever month. Am I a child of God?"

You're a child of God as long as you can sue for forgiveness. As long as you can repent, God will forgive you until 70 times seven and far beyond that time. But the real danger is that we continue in this tendency to rationalize the sin, and to excuse it, and to talk our way around it, until we begin to build up a resistance and a hardening of our conscious towards the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

There's a famous passage in Hebrews 6:4 that deals with this: "For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt."

Do you see? The key words are, "It is impossible to restore again to repentance." It is not impossible for God to forgive us. God can forgive us until 70 times seven. But it is impossible to restore again to repentance a person who continues to so rationalize and excuse sin in his life that he comes past the point of ever repenting.

I think those are the problems we share. Paul expresses it in Romans 7:22-24. It's that old passage that describes the defeated life that we've so often looked at: "For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

The real problem there for us is two-fold. We often find ourselves obeying God outwardly, but inwardly we have a tremendous strain to disobey him. As well as that we have often some sins that eventually have broken out into outward expression in our lives that we keep on rationalizing and excusing away. Do you see it's the excusing that is the heart of sin? That's what sin is.

Actually the argument mark isn't over, "Do you tell a lie?" or, "Have I lived the whole of the past year without ever losing my temper?" That isn't the issue. The real issue is that sin is an attitude of resistance to God's will that wants to rationalize away any deviation from his will -- instead of face it and treat it as sin. That's the real problem inside us.

The problem is how we treat sin as just a human shortcoming, and the corresponding tendency in our nature to suppress it or repress it, and to strive to overcome it, and to fight it. That isn't God's plan for us. It isn't God's plan that we should live in that kind of rationalizing and suppressing and repressing kind of life.

Maybe we could look at the problem as we were mentioning it at the beginning of this talk. The real problem is that though God destroyed all of us in Jesus -- and that's why he can forgive us -- yet we have not all entered into that. Now, we did become Christians, because the condition for becoming a Christian is, "to as many as receive Jesus God gives the right to become the children of God." It's important, I think, to see that the Greek word for "right" is "exousias." The King James Version wrongly interprets it as "power."

God gives you the right to become the children of God. He gives you the right to eat fully of the tree of life the moment you are ready to receive his Son Jesus. And you actually do receive the Spirit of Jesus within you at that time.

But the fact is that that's possible only because God destroyed us all in Jesus. You can only experience the fullness of that life when you are actually willing to dot the i's and cross the t's of what God did to us in Christ. Only when we're willing to identify ourselves totally with Jesus' death will we be able to identify ourselves totally with his fullness of life and his resurrection life.

Part of the problem is not that everything has not been achieved for us by God and Jesus -- but that we're only entering into half of it. Really what we need to experience is a complete death. Not just a complete birth but a complete death with Jesus.

If you say to me, "Oh brother, why is that?" Because the basic principle upon which God deals with us is, "Be it unto you according to your faith." God can only do in each of us what we believe he is able to do and what we're willing to let him do. And so it is unto us according to our faith. So I don't know about you, but for me, when I heard of becoming a Christian, it was never told me that I died with Jesus. I was told Jesus died for me so that I wouldn't have to die. So I believed that and God dealt with me according to my belief.

I think with many of us that's the case. God dealt with us according to our belief. We believed that Jesus would come into our hearts when we asked him in, and that's what happened. We did not believe for any death with Jesus. We didn't even think it was necessary to die with Jesus. We thought God had destroyed the whole human race in Jesus and that was it.

But it is possible to enter into an actual experience with that in our own life. You know the secret is this -- that sin is an attitude that has to be destroyed and displaced by the attitude of the Holy Spirit -- whereas sins are acts, and thoughts, and words that have to be forgiven. What most of us enter into is a freedom from the outward symptoms first, and we deal with God over the outward acts, and thoughts, and words.

Before I became a Christian I would have known what anger was by my angry words. But if you had said to me, "Oh, you're angry deep down even though you're not showing it" -- I don't know if I had enough sensitivity or light to even recognize that.

I recognized anger when I expressed it. I recognized irritability when I expressed it. But it was only after the Spirit of Jesus came into me and gave me something to compare my own spirit with, that I began to sense that you could have an attitude that didn't come out and didn't express itself.

So it seems that it's almost like a darkened room -- until you bring a candle in you don't see the dark corners. It seems almost as if until the pure Spirit of Jesus comes into our hearts, we can't see the really dark corners -- they just look gray to us. So for most of us, I think we've come into a forgiveness of our sins but not into a real cleansing of the inward attitude.

What is that inward attitude? Some people say it's just the old nature, and you're committed to fighting the old nature for the rest of your lives. There's something silly even in the semantics

of it -- because if you say to me, "Oh, he has a generous nature," you mean he's a generous kind of person. That's his nature. That's the basic kind of person he are. You don't really mean, "Yeah, well he has a generous nature but he also has another nature." When you talk about a person being of a certain nature you mean that's really what that person is.

Now do you see you can't have good fruit from a bad tree and you can't have bad fruit from a good tree? You can't have sweet water from a sour source and you can't have sour water from a sweet source? You're either one or the other.

We all like to think that on the whole we are children of God and on the whole we are really Christians. But there are just little bits of us that aren't Christ-like. I think it's probably the other way around. I think on the whole we have an outward appearance of being Jesus, but inwardly we're our real selves, and that it's not a question so much of one nature fighting against another. It's simply a fact that the desires of the flesh are against the spirit wherever they are. The desires of the flesh are always against the spirit. But where the desires of the flesh are strong in us, it's probably because we have not really received the divine nature of God.

And that's why many of us will say, "Oh, should the Christian life be a striving and a straining to obey?" No, it's probably true that the Christian life is never that. It's probably true that it's just Christ imitators that live a straining, striving kind of life.

Yet do you see that you can't accuse a brother or a sister who has entered into that of not being a Christian in any sense? Because he has entered into all that God has told him, and all that he has believed for he has entered into. But once more life begins to come to him and he begins to see that more is possible. Then he is under obligation to go on into it.

Romans 3:25 shows part of the work that Jesus did on the cross. Romans 3:25: "Whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins." So the blood of Jesus is what we believe was shed to enable God to forgive us for our sins. And so we enter into a sense of the meaning of the blood of Jesus. Every time we sin we offer to God the blood of Jesus.

But the second part of the work that God did on the cross is in Romans 6 and it refers to the cross of Christ. You see how Paul tackles it? He says in Romans 6:3: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

Now, you've been baptized into Christ Jesus. You've been baptized into him for the forgiveness of your sins. Now do you realize that you were baptized into his death? Romans 6:4: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

The death of Jesus, or the cross of Christ, is something that we enter into. Why? So that we might walk in newness of life. Verse 5 says, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." The truth is that it's really impossible to walk in newness of life until we enter into the actuality of being buried with Christ. It's impossible to walk in anything but a partial experience of newness of life until you've entered into the death of Christ.

The truth is that we all have been crucified. The truth is that you're not really alive today as

far as God is concerned -- you've been destroyed. But you and I keep believing Satan's lie that this is our life and this is our future, and we have a right to our own way and we have a right to establish our reputation. The truth is we haven't. We're all dead. At this moment we're each one in heaven beside the Father -- but we won't believe that or aren't willing to believe that.

First of all, some of us won't believe it. We just won't believe it. We won't believe God's word that we know that our old self was crucified with him. We just won't believe it. It's a problem of the mind. We set our eyes on our experience rather than on God's word.

Some of us have a problem that we are not willing for it. We're not willing to be dead. You have a car that you like and you have clothes that you like. You have a lot of things you want to look forward to -- marriage and a whole future.

We don't want to be dead people. We're not willing to be dead. Really, if we were honest with God, when he says, "You're dead with my Son," we would recognize that we're saying, "We're not dead with your Son. We're alive and we have a right to our own way. We have a right to ensure that we have a certain future ahead of us."

It's disagreement with God. It's a controversy with God when we don't enter into the death with Christ. I think it's good to see the details of it. You see in Romans 6:6 there are three elements involved in our defeated life that we live even after we've received the Spirit of Jesus into us.

You see in Verse 6 there's first of all the old self. There's that tendency, that desire, to have our own way, to be God of our own lives, to do what we want, to insist on our own rights.

Then you see the body of sin, or the sinful body it is called in the RSV {Revised Standard Version of the Bible}. That's the second element. The sinful body, the body that is being used to commit sin for years. The emotions have been used to getting angry with people who tried to oppose us. The mind has been used to trying to manipulate other people. The body itself has been used to being lazy and being indolent. So, the body can always be called a sinful body because it's being used for so long by sin. That's the second element.

Then the third element is, "we might no longer be enslaved to sin." That's Satan himself. Satan controls the attitude of sin in our world. Satan has spread throughout this world an attitude that is determined to live happily in the world without God, without his creator. It's an attitude of rebellion against God, to go our own way rather than God's way, to do what is right in our own eyes. Now, those are the three elements that are used in bringing us into a defeated life.

Sin is the source of the rebellion against God. The body of sin is the instrument that that sin uses to express itself in the world. Do you see the middle man? The middle man is our old self. The middle man is the connection between sin and our body. The middle man is that little bit of attitude that self has that it has a right to its own way. It's the attitude of the will really. It's the evil will -- the attitude of the will that wants to go its own way.

Now you see what God does. The perfectionist eliminates sin from the world. They say, "Yeah, when you've entered into the death of Christ you never sin again. You can't ever sin again even if you try hard -- you can't ever sin. Sin is just eliminated from the world." That's what perfectionists say.

There are some perfectionists who teach holiness in that line. They say, "If you have entered into the death of Christ you'll never sin again. Sin is once and for all blotted out from the world." They get themselves into the problem where they go home and beat their wives at night and they say, "No, it wasn't a sin. It wasn't a sin. I'm a sanctified Christian. I can't possibly sin. I know it because I've entered into the death of Christ." That's what some holiness perfectionist will say. They'll try to eliminate sin from the world.

The ascetics -- many of whom I think found themselves in the Catholic Church at one time anyway -- the ascetics will try to eliminate the body. They'll teach the body as the problem. They'll say, "Let's eliminate the body. Let's beat it with irons and with chains." They'll say, "Let's fast, and let's treat the body so badly that we take from it all power and energy to sin."

That isn't the answer. God's answer is you take out the middle man. You take out the old self. You crucify the old self. You crucify that evil will that wants to go its own way. That's what Romans 6:6 means: we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed -- or really rendered inoperative as the Greek word means. Rendered inoperative -- and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. It's the old self that God rendered inoperative. It's the evil will.

That's what makes us get angry. Your problem and my problem is: are we willing to have that evil will destroyed? I think some of us have said, "Will God make me willing?" Well, God has already destroyed that evil will, but you have to be willing to allow him to destroy it in you. You have to be willing to allow him to destroy what you call freedom of your will.

In other words, we have to be prepared to face the consequences if we were never to be allowed to sleep late when we wanted to. Would you be prepared to be in that position? Would you give up your right of ever sleeping late in the morning just because you wanted to -- if God wanted you not to? Would you be prepared to give up your right ever to have ice cream again if God didn't want you to have it? Being willing for God to destroy the evil will means being willing for God to destroy your will completely and make it absolutely like his whenever he wants to. You'd still have to exercise the will, but you're giving up the right ever to exercise it against God.

Now what the Holy Spirit does if a man is really anxious to enter into that, is he begins to show up in your life the places where you wouldn't be prepared for that -- where you just don't want that. He begins to show you the places in your life where you want your own way and you're determined to get it, and you're not prepared for that will to be destroyed. He'll take the darling sins, or the darling relationships, the things that are dearest to you, that mean most to you. He'll take those and say, "Would you be prepared for my will to be done alone there and for your will to be destroyed?"

What we need to do is to come to the place where we are willing for the Holy Spirit to do that. Where we say, "Lord, I'm willing for you to destroy this evil will and even my good will. I'm willing for you to destroy that. I'm willing to do whatever you want me to do -- if you will only make this crucifixion with Christ real in my life." It is true that after you get down all the levels of the things you're willing to do and the things you're not willing to do, the Holy Spirit graciously brings you to a place where he isolates the evil will, the heart of the evil will, the heart of that self.

It's just a miracle of the Holy Spirit that he isolates that for us, because we all probably think

as I used to think, “Oh, no. It’s just my mind that is used to working intellectually, and so I have a natural pride in my mind. I just have to control that pride.” Or I thought, “No, I’m just an emotional kind of person. Therefore I have trouble with my feelings. I just have to discipline my emotions or my feelings a wee bit more.” But really the heart of it was that my will was letting loose those things, and my will had to be destroyed with Christ on Calvary.

The Holy Spirit is so good to isolate that for you, and he’ll find out whatever is your darling sin, or whatever is really the heart of your self will. He’ll bring you to that place and say, “Would you be willing for me to destroy it?” And he’ll only destroy it when you say, “Yes.”

I think that’s what some people mean when they say, “Can I pray that the Lord make me willing to be willing?” Well, yes, if you really get down to business and find out in what way you are not willing and are prepared for God to destroy that sense in which you are not willing. But you actually have to be willing for God to take away the right of you to do whatever you want to do. And when you get to the heart of that, then the Holy Spirit will make that crucifixion real in you.

I’ve already shared before that it was just deliverance for me, and I almost thought that I had really hardly experienced Christ’s life at all before that time. Even though I did know I was a child of God before then, and I knew I was forgiven, and I knew God would accept me into his own presence -- yet I never had any real experience of the victorious or pure life within me -- until one day I did say, “I’m really willing.”

There are two parts to it, and it might be just good to look at the two verses. First of all to look at 2 Corinthians 5:14 and see the complete experience of the new birth and the new death, or the complete birth and the complete death together as they are in scripture. Because I think we often try to separate them -- and you cannot separate really the birth and the death. You cannot separate the birth in the spirit from your death in Christ -- though many of us have done this in order to produce an easier kind of Christianity.

2 Corinthians 5:14: “For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all.” That is what most of us enter into initially. We are convinced that Jesus has died for us so that our sins can be forgiven. “Therefore all have died.” Because all have died, we have all died with him. That’s what we need to enter into to experience freedom from the power of sin. Not only from the penalty of sin but from its power.

The way to enter in is simple. It’s Romans 6:11. First of all the believing: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin” -- reckon yourselves dead to sin -- “and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” So we have a responsibility to believe what God has told us is true in scripture.

Then the second part is the obedience -- Romans 8:13: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.” Submission to the Holy Spirit will enable the Holy Spirit to make this death real in us and this victorious life real in us. So what’s needed is: believing what has happened to us in Jesus, and obeying the Holy Spirit day-by-day.

The same truths are taught in Galatians 5:24-25. It might be good to look at them there again and see the two parts that we need to be willing to enter into: “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” You belong to Christ when you receive his spirit into you. If you have done that then you have already crucified the flesh with his passions

and desires, and you need to take your stand on that biblical ground, “I have been crucified with Christ.” Not, “I have to crucify myself,” but, “I have been crucified.”

Then verse 25 says, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” It’s submission to the Holy Spirit day-by-day. Some people have said, “How does it become real in us?” Well, you believe it and you submit to the Holy Spirit and you trust him to make it real in you.

Next time I’d like to deal, if possible, with some of the difficulties that we run up against in the actual experiential side of what has potentially taken place in Jesus. So maybe you’d perhaps think of some questions for that presentation that we can then talk about.