

A Simple Gospel

Matthew 1:21

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

From time to time, loved ones, what we have done is pause in the study of Romans, and that's what I'd like to do just today, before we begin to tackle in detail Israel and all that God has to show us through the people of Israel, and I'd like once more just to preach the gospel, very briefly, just a simple, clean gospel, because I think we allow it to get dirty by all the frills we add to it. Again and again I think that some of you loved ones are anxious to know and understand, and yet because of the presuppositions that you have in your mind and because of the background that we all come from, you still don't see it as clearly and cleanly as it really is, and so I'd just like to share a clean gospel with you this morning. It's Matthew 1:21. That's the cleanest gospel you can get, before we've tampered with it. Matthew 1:21. All of us will know the words that the angel spoke to Joseph telling him about the coming birth of His son, "She will bear a son," the angel said, Mary will bear a son, "and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Now would you just look at your translation there and would you notice the preposition, the preposition before the phrase "their sins". The preposition is "from": He will save His people FROM their sins. That's what God has promised to do for us in Jesus. Now, could I push you again by pointing out to you that there's a great difference between the word for "from" in Greek and "in", just in case you think Matthew could have fumbled over the spelling. The word "from" is "apo" in Greek, or it looks like that in English transliteration, a-p-o. The word for "in" is "in", or it looks like that in English letters. So this is the word for "from", and that's the word in Matthew 1:21. It's "from" their sins. This is the word for "in", and it isn't there, it isn't there at all.

Now loved ones, just to startle you into reflection for a moment, the great bulk of fundamentalist evangelical Christianity believes that THAT is the word, "in". Now really, truly. In practice, and often even in the way we preach and share with each another, the greater number of us translate the gospel as if the Greek word was "in" and not "apo". In other words, we translate that verse not as it is, "you will call His name Jesus, for He will save his people FROM their sins", we translate it as if it was "you will call His name Jesus, for He will save his people IN their sins". Now loved ones, that isn't the gospel. And yet brothers and sisters, that is what the great majority of us who think of ourselves, vaguely even, as evangelicals, teach.

Now really, if you're honest with me, I think you'll have to admit that the great majority of us believe that Person A may sin and Person B may sin, but Person A is a Christian, so he knows that Jesus died for him, and therefore Jesus' blood covers his sins. He may be sinning like mad and beating his wife every night, but yet he's a Christian, and so his sins are forgiven, and so he's saved IN his sins, or despite his sins. Whereas Person B is a miserable old wretched pagan, a non-Christian, and he beats his wife every night, but he doesn't believe that Jesus died for him, and HE is going to hell. That's normally the way we all interpret the gospel. We really, in other words, say that the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is that one can sin with immunity, or with impunity, without being punished, and the other can sin, but IS punished. Now loved ones, that is not the gospel. The gospel is not "Jesus will save you IN your sins." The gospel

is, that "Jesus will save you FROM your sins."

I don't think there's one person here that won't see what the outcome of that has been. The outcome of that truncated version of the gospel has been a name for Christianity which is pitiful in secular society. Because secular society will say the same thing about Christians again and again, "if they practice what they preached," "they talk big, but they don't do big," "they talk about what they should do for God, but they don't do it." Indeed I put it to you, what has put you and me off ordinary church life and ordinary Christianity? Is it not seeing often moms and dads, often friends, often older people, believing, believing, preaching, preaching, arguing over doctrine, arguing over church denomination, but not living like Jesus. Now loved ones, it's really because we've perverted the gospel. We've made it mean Jesus will save us IN our sins, not FROM our sins. That's why we get the bumper sticker, "Christians are not perfect, only forgiven." Now it's nice, it's nice in a way, except that, I know as a person who was not a Christian, I would look at a bumper sticker like that and say, "Yeah, that's their excuse" and I would think to myself, "Yeah, yeah, big talk" "Yeah, mercy, mercy, but I have to live with them and all their misery." Now loved ones, do you see that the gospel is that Jesus will save us FROM our sins, not IN our sins?

I don't think there's one of us here that doesn't have tremendous respect for old C.S. Lewis. Now I think probably almost all of us, whatever our background is, have great respect for the man's clarity of thought and for his own integrity. When he says things, you can see the reason behind it, and you can go with him in it. I remember even before I would have stood with him spiritually, I respected what he said because he seemed an honest, intelligent man. Now, you may not know it, for old C.S. Lewis had mentioned this one Sunday morning, old C.S. Lewis came to Jesus primarily through the writings of one man. That one man was an old 19th century Scottish preacher called George MacDonald, whom some of you may have met through his novels. George MacDonald saw to the heart of what we're talking about this morning, just very clearly. He almost put it in the same words that we've been using, he says about that verse, Matthew 1:21, "Jesus will save us from our sins." He says, "the Lord never came to deliver man from the consequences of their sins while yet those sins remained." The Lord never came to deliver us from the consequences of our sins, you see, which is usually in our minds hell, you see, while yet those sins remained. Then I'll read it slowly because the logic is a little ... tricky. "That would be to cast out of the window the medicine of cure." He regards, you see, the punishment as a medicine of cure. "While yet the man lays sick, to go dead against the very laws of being." Then he says, "yet men have constantly taken this verse Matthew 1:21, to mean that Jesus came to save them from the punishment of their sins. This idea, this miserable fancy has terribly corrupted the preaching of the gospel. The message of the good news has not been truly delivered."

Now loved ones, do you see what really he and countless others are saying? That DEATH is the wages of sin, in order to DESTROY sin. Death is not the wages of sin, that somehow you have to try to get somebody else to pay for you. Death is the wages of sin in that it DESTROYS sin. God is not sitting up in heaven saying, "How will I show these miserable creatures that I made that I'm real mad, I'm just real mad with them, and I just am real mad with their sins. I know! I'll roar and I'll huff and I'll puff, and I'll kill my own son." It's not so, loved ones. The very picture of it seems ridiculous to us. The Father hates and detests sin, and has to destroy it, and has to burn it out of existence. That's why he said, the wages of sin is death. That's why the Bible says "he who has died is free from sin," -- not from the consequences of sin. The consequences of sin is death, and death is there to destroy sin. That's the very purpose of death. The purpose of Jesus' death is to free us from our sins -- to destroy sin in us -- to free our lives from sinning. It isn't so that we'll be able to go on sinning in this life, and yet have the feeling, "yeah, yeah, but that neighbor of mine

or that colleague in the office, he sins and I sin, except that he'll have to face the consequences of sin, but lucky old me, I'm not going to have to do that. Loved ones, that's not true. God's desire in Jesus, and in Jesus' death, is to free our lives from our sins.

Please don't sit there and say, "Oh, you've destroyed my peace, you've destroyed my peace!" Loved ones, if you really want God with all your heart, you'll respond, you'll say, "Oh, that's what He wants, that's what He wants. Ah, I know He's a merciful Father. I know He's going to continue to forgive my sins until he can get ahold of them, but Lord I know you want rid of them now, I know that's the purpose of Jesus' death, I know you want rid of them, I know you're not going to kill me this moment just because I have something in my life that's not right, but Lord as long as I side with you and say that's why Jesus died, ok Lord, I want rid of the sin in my life." Loved ones, if you're sitting there with that complacent, lackadaisical attitude that says, "Ah well, I may not have all the sins out of my life, but I know that I believe Jesus died for me, so I believe I'm ok anyway, I'll do my best." Loved ones, that's a perversion of the gospel. The gospel is not, "believe that Jesus is going to die instead of you and do your best to please God," no. It's not "believe and try." The gospel is, "be willing to die with Jesus, to running your own life, and come alive in the power of His Spirit to living like Him." The gospel is not an autosuggestion.

Now loved ones, I would point out to you that if you believe the other way, all you are is a Jew. That's all you are. If you believe the other way, that you can sin with impunity because Jesus died for you, you're a Jew. The Jews knew that their sins could be covered: that's all they could be. Now I point that out to you, in Psalm 32:1, and that's a Jew speaking, Psalm 32:1. The Jews knew that they could have their sins forgiven. They knew that their sins could be covered. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." That's all that could happen. Jesus was the lamb that was slain from before the foundation of the world. He was slain in the heart of God before the creation ever took place. In virtue of that, God refused to flood the world out with another flood. So in that sense, he gave men respite. He forgave them for the rebellion against Him, giving them a chance to deal with them during this life, so he could forgive sins even in the times of Jews.

Now, Jesus had not died on the cross. It was virtually impossible for anyone but the outstanding prophets and priests and kings, who had drawn very close to the Spirit of Christ, to experience that deliverance from self that can take place in us because of Jesus' death. They did know that their sin could be covered. Look at verse 5. "I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.'; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin." Now loved ones, Jews could have the guilt of their sins forgiven. They could have the GUILT of their sins forgiven. God was satisfied with that in those days. You'll find that, remember, when Paul was preaching to a group of people in Acts 17:30, that's part of what that verse means, Acts 17:30, "The times of ignorance God overlooked." Now not only the ignorance of the pagans, who didn't know anything about God, but even the ignorance of the Jews, who did not know the truth of the lamb being slain from the foundation of the world, and all of us being destroyed with him with all our self-centeredness and our self-will. "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent." That's why, loved ones, you're under a different situation now and dispensation than the Jews. You can't sit there and hear me preach this stuff Sunday after Sunday and say "Well, well, I don't want to go that far, I just want to be a good Jew." Because the times of ignorance God overlooked, and He would overlook that kind of thing in those days when they knew no better. Now you know, and I know, that we, with all our right to ourselves and our right to our own way, because these are all the things that bring sin in our lives. All our pride, and all our preoccupation with people treating us the right way, and resenting people who criticize us

wrongly or treat us unjustly. All that was crucified with Jesus, and if we're willing to die with Him, and identify ourselves completely with Him, we know we can be freed from that, and from all the sin that stems from it.

Now loved ones, that's the light that you and I are responsible to respond to. That's the difference between a Jew and a Christian. A Jew is one who all he knows is that his sin's forgiven and the guilt taken away. A Christian knows not only the guilt taken away, but the power of sin in his life destroyed by the power of Jesus' death.

Would you like to see what the life of a good Jew was like? Now don't faint: Romans 7. Dearly loved ones, you know we think of ourselves better than we ought, cause I know you're all fighting this and saying, ah I know you got this one wrong, brother. Loved ones, this is it, you know, Romans 7:15, this is a Jew speaking. I know the argument over this is a defeated Christian, loved ones, I'll show you why it's a Jew in a moment. Romans 7:15, they had no power in their lives. "I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good, so then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Now loved ones, you may say to me, brother do you not think that's a defeated Christian? Loved ones, no, no that's a Jew. Even a baby Christian has the power that is stated clearly in 1 John 3:9, if you'd look at it. Even a little one who has just begun to know his position with Jesus or her position with Jesus on the cross is in the same situation as that described in 1 John 3:9, "No one born of God commits sin." In other words, when Paul says, "I do what I do not want," he's saying, I'm not a Christian, because a Christian never does what he doesn't want to do, because that's the word, it's poieo, those of you who know Greek, and it's p-o-i-e-o in English letters. That's the word used in 1 John 3:9. It means "to do," it becomes poet, you know, in English, poetry, you make something, you do something. Poieo is "to do." That's what that verse says. No one born of God DOES SIN. That is, even a little child Christian, even a little one who has just begun to know Jesus has enough power of Jesus' Spirit in his life to hold down what is wrong. At least he can rise to the level of the noble pagans, that's it. That's what that verse says.

I know, loved ones, all of us have been taught, "ah brother, you can't say that – "that sin is perfection". It's nowhere near perfection at all. It's just that outwardly you're able to conform your life to what you know is true and right, that Plato could do, that Socrates could do, that Confucius could do. You read their lives, their lives that are flawless outwardly. Now loved ones, even a little baby Christian who has really dealt with Jesus and seen that God's purpose in including him in Jesus' death on Calvary was to destroy his life, to destroy his right to his life, his right to his own way, his right to plans, future, those are all the rights that we defend, that actually produce sin in us eventually.

Loved ones, those are what make us gods of our own lives. I know we all like to think, ah that's what a good red blooded American has a right to, you know, the right to his own decisions, the right to his own future, no. That's only the right of a person who is running his own life, who is trying to be his own god. It was on Calvary in Jesus you and I were included in his death, and those rights were destroyed, and the moment we agree to that, and that's what it means to become a Christian, the moment we agree to that, that moment we're freed from all the resentments that come from not getting our own way, from having other people treat us unfairly. Now loved ones, that's what it means to be a Christian. You don't do sin, you may feel sin within, and that I'd like to deal with in some future Sundays, you may feel anger within, you may feel resentment within, you may feel jealousy

within, but you have enough power in Jesus' Spirit to hold that all down and to be outwardly a person that's pleasant to live with.

Loved ones, do you see what I'm getting at? I think a lot of us have taken the current thinking of our society, and we've used it as an excuse to say, "Well you know, I'm not through to the fullness of the Spirit" or some other phrase that we use as an excuse, and "that's why, I'm so hard to live with." "That's why, I lose my temper every week." "Ah, you know, I'm not through to those heights of Christian sanctity that we're meant to get to." Loved ones, there's no heights there. An ordinary little Christian will not commit sin. He has the power, she has the power to live in conformity outwardly to what they know to be true and right.

Did you see the commercial last night on television, a little girl about to steal something from a store? It wasn't put out by Lutheran League or something like that, or the Catholic church or something else. Isn't it dreadful that it was put out by the businesses instead? It was put out by retailers, and it said, "Shoplifting is wrong." There's something funny, isn't there, about, it's the retailers that are trying to defend absolutes, of course because they know we're going to destroy ourselves if we keep at it. It's interesting that it's the business people that start coming off with commercials pointing out "that is wrong." Why do they have to do it? Well you know why, because we've all encouraged each other to think, "you can't help doing wrong things, you can't. With these poor wee weak wills that we have, ah we can't, you know. We feel temper, oh we just have to let it rip, in fact if you let it rip, maybe the more you express it the more you get rid of it." That's just silly, you know, the more you express it the stronger it grows.

We've been taught to believe that we're poor puny little human beings, and after all, human beings can't be perfect, and that's the excuse we use to be absolute ogres, you know, we can't be perfect. We don't realize that, and we're not talking about perfection, we're talking about horror stories, really. You know that we've brought ourselves up on that. We've been teaching ourselves, "you can't, you can't, your wee weak will can't do it." Loved ones, you have enough of Jesus' Spirit in you to obey outwardly all that he says is right. Now I agree with you, we have to deal later with that: can you be delivered from inward sins, from feeling anger, from the inclination to sin. The truth is you can, but at least the first step in Christianity is not believing that Jesus died instead of you, because the Bible doesn't say that anywhere. The Bible says Jesus died for you. But it means so that you could die with him, to yourself and to all the powers within you that make you do what you don't want to do. If you're willing to identify yourself with Jesus, he through his Spirit can give you enough power and enough grace to live like him.

Just finish in this. That's why when the people on the day of Pentecost asked Peter, "What do we do now, after you preached this to us?" He said, "Be baptized," it's Acts 2:38, "Be baptized in the name of Jesus for the remission of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." And in other places he talks about being baptized INTO Jesus, and the word "into" in Greek is different from the word "in", that's the word "in" there, you see. "In" means "in". "Into" is e-i-s. It's a different word entirely. In other verses, you get that phrase used, "Be baptized into Jesus." It means, if you want to be a Christian, you identify yourself totally with Jesus. You say, Lord Jesus, I'm willing to die as you did, to all the things that we human beings think we should have, to reputation, to position, to our friends and our peers praising us, to security and finances and material things. To fame, to being well-known, to being looked up to, to getting our own way, Lord Jesus, if you had nowhere to lay your head, I'm willing to identify with you. Loved ones, that's what becoming a Christian is: it's identifying yourself completely with Jesus, because as you do that, the power of his miraculous death on Calvary begins to destroy sin in your life, and begins to

free you from your sins.

I'm just anxious that, on these Sunday mornings, when we enjoy being with each other and in God's presence so much, I'm just anxious that you won't misunderstand what the simple gospel is. The simple gospel is, Jesus will save you FROM your sins, not IN your sins. Now oh I pray that nobody will meet any of you in this family and have to mutter under their breath, "I wish they practiced what they preached." (What's Campus Church, what's Fish Enterprises? They'll all be gone and dust in a few years.) I really pray that you won't be hypocrites, and that none of us will be those intellectual believers who are just good Jews, but that you'll really come into a relationship with Jesus that will free you from your sins.

Now while it's so late, I can't ask for questions loved ones, but do come up after, if you want to talk. Let us pray:

Dear Father, thank you for your words to us that if we walk in the light as you are in the light, the blood of Jesus cleanseth us from all sin. Thank you, Father, that if we set our hearts against all that is wrong in our lives, and we move towards an identification with Jesus with all our hearts, you will be merciful to us. Lord, you will not forgive those of us who camp on the sides of the river and try to get forgiveness without any deliverance in our own lives. Lord, we know that you will not tolerate the Pharisees or the hypocrites, so Lord we would come to you now, and Holy Spirit ask you, is there any way in which we are not entering into Jesus' death? Is there any sin in our lives that we need to be freed from, that you can free us from? Lord we know you'll forgive us until you free us, if we give our whole hearts and lives to you, for that freedom and deliverance. Lord we would do that this morning, trust you to make us people that live like your Son, and that will be enjoyable to be with in heaven. We ask this in His name.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.