

PERFECT OBEDIENCE OR SINLESS PERFECTION?

ROMANS 6:18

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

This was in the 'Chicago Tribune' yesterday and it reported an incident in Miami. I think you'll feel it is really incredible when you hear it. Steven Inhoff, 87 years of age who plunged from a Miami bridge to the sound of taunting cries from truck drivers, died yesterday while still in a coma. Acquaintances told police that Inhoff was despondent and lonely when he climbed to the top of the little river bridge two weeks ago; he plunged into the water as a by-stander shouted, "Come on, jump, jump".

His only visitor in the hospital was Everett Staley, 21, who had pulled him from the waters. It's just unbelievable. I think all of us immediately say, "No, no, they didn't mean it, they didn't mean it." And maybe they didn't mean it, maybe that's right. Maybe they didn't mean it because they thought the old man was only pretending when he was standing on the bridge. Maybe that's so.

I think we are all a little skeptical when we say that and yet we all feel, "Well, he couldn't mean it, they couldn't mean it. They couldn't have meant to make him jump to his death. It was a mistake. They couldn't mean that, if they were human beings at all. They couldn't taunt an old fellow of 87 to jump off a bridge to his death." I think we all feel that, don't we?

We all feel, "If they were human beings at all, they couldn't have meant to do as cruel a thing as that." I think many of us feel that when human beings are insensitive to each other like that, when they're as cruel to each other as those truck drivers were, when they're as indifferent to the predicament another poor soul is in as they seemed to be then we tend to say, "At that time they were possessed by something that wasn't human at all. It was something utterly inhuman." We ourselves have found that we've been in the same position.

We've discovered a resentment boiling up inside us against another person that didn't even seem to be part of us, ourselves. It seemed to be something that was apart from us completely. You remember we've often said that it had such control of us that at times it seems supernatural.

Now brothers and sisters, that's the power that we have been discussing for several months. It's the power that is outlined in the verse that we'll study today. It's Romans 6:18. "And, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." The word sin is actually two Greek words including the article 'hay hamartia', (the sin) and it means the power of sin.

Now, that's the power that presumably made the truck drivers taunt the old man to jump. That's the power that often seems to take over your will and mine when we want to be patient. This power seems to take over and make us impatient. It's a power that is different from another word for sin that we noticed in Romans 6:16, if you look at that two verses back.

In verse 16 the word sin is mentioned again, "Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin" -- now there sin does not have the article at all. I suppose I am an incorrigible school teacher and the difference there is that the sin you see, is the power of sin whereas sin in Greek, it looks like 'hamartia' and the other one has the article before it 'hay hamartia'. This one means the power of sin, whereas this

one means the outward expression of sin, in act, thought or in word.

The one we're talking about these months is the power of sin, the inward power that seems to make you want to assert and defend yourself to have your own way, to be God, to do what you want to do. It's the things presumably that would make even one of the truck drivers sense that maybe the fellow was serious and maybe I shouldn't do it. But this power inside him makes him want to have his own way. He wants to have a joke, so he taunts the old fellow. It's that power that we're talking about dear ones and it's that power that seems to get hold of people today in the world.

It seems to be supernatural. It seems to be an inhuman drive to have your own way and to assert yourself to do whatever you want to do, whatever effect it will have on anybody else. The contemporary psychologists are calling it in vague terms 'the essential perversity of mankind'. At least they're now recognizing that mankind is perverse.

But they call it that. In educational circles they call it being an over achiever. Yes, you are an over achiever because you want to trample everybody else under feet to get up to the top of the heap yourself. You're an over achiever. So often when we are talking about rivalry or competition or envy or jealousy or unrest within, we give it nice names.

Jesus, whom we believe to be the unique Son of God, said, "This power is the antagonism and hostility towards God which a certain being feels who had rebelled against God in pre-eternity." Jesus said that person we call at times, Satan, but he is a supernatural being who has such antagonism and hostility towards God that it just produces ridiculous inhuman results. That's what we feel inside us when we get angry, when we get irritable, when we do the kind of things that the truck drivers did.

We really accept this attitude of hostility that Satan has towards God. We make it our own and the tragedy with many of us is, we have discovered that not only has it produced many disastrous traits in our own character, (like extreme selfishness, knotted up resentment that prevents us getting to sleep at night, envy and jealousy that drives us to achieving more and more, and a tremendous greed and covetousness that we cannot control) but I think many of us would admit that this power seems to have got hold of our own wills so that we are not even free to exercise our wills.

Our wills seem shattered by this power so that we cannot unchain them. That's why for most of us here, it has been such a deliverance to see that God destroyed that selfish fettered will in Jesus on Calvary in a pre-temporal, super-spatial miracle. He took our selfish and chained wills and put them into Jesus. He destroyed them in Jesus and he is able to actualize that destruction in our own lives today.

It's a bit like having a leg with gangrene in it. You cannot do anything about it yourself. All you can do to prevent the poison spreading throughout your body is to give a surgeon the right to amputate. Now that's the only ability we have in this predicament. We can give God the Father the right to actualize in us the destruction of that self-centered will and to substitute the free, loving will of Jesus.

You remember we've talked often about how that comes about in Romans 6:11. There's the first step, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin". It means you have to reckon yourselves dead with Jesus to the right to men's respect, to the right to success in your career, to the right even to satisfaction in your marriage or in your domestic life.

You must consider yourselves dead to those rights and alive only to Jesus. Then in Romans 6:13, "Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life." Then you yield yourself moment-by-moment to instantaneous obedience to the Holy Spirit. And what we found is that when you do that, the Holy Spirit reproduces in you the very life of Jesus. He produces in you the very attitudes that Jesus Himself expressed in his own life.

You remember it's expressed there in Galatians 5:22-23, these are the attitudes that are borne by the Holy Spirit in a person who is willing to die to self with Jesus, "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, against such there is no law." There's no law of course because the laws are simply descriptions of the way the Holy Spirit acts. When the Holy Spirit fills you completely then he automatically reproduces the things that are described in the law, both the Ten Commandments and the laws in the New Testament.

That's why brothers and sisters in Romans 6:18, (today's verse), we read that description, "Having been set free from sin, we have become slaves of righteousness." In other words, you enter into a victorious life that is filled with obedience to God's law and that reflects the life of Jesus spontaneously.

Now really, this is the heart of the experience. It is a deliverance from an inward resistance to God. That's the heart of it dear ones. Being filled with the Holy Spirit or being crucified with Christ or dying to self or baptism of the Holy Spirit, whatever name you give to it, that experience or that level of life is an experience of being delivered from the resistance to God's will. It's a freedom from an inward weight. It's a freedom to obey God.

It's an experience where before you wanted to be patient but the irritability was boiling up inside you. Now the irritability isn't boiling up inside you. It's that kind of an experience. Now you may say, "Is it automatic? Do I just find love and joy bubbling forth from me all the time?"

Loved ones, as you allow the Holy Spirit to re-write your personality (that has been programmed for so many years by self); the life of Jesus becomes increasingly automatic, natural and spontaneous within you. But always the Holy Spirit is leading you into new situations which require new choices. It's better not to call it automatic but rather to say that you're free to choose at last.

You're free to choose. Before when you came into your room and saw that your roommate threw all your clothes all over the bed you weren't free to choose. You had no choice but to go straight for them and tear them apart with your words.

Now, the Holy Spirit cleanses that inward sin from your heart so that you're free to choose. It is a moment-by-moment choosing to obey God. In fact, that's really one of the best ways to put it. It's a freedom to obey God when before you weren't free. You wanted to obey God. You wanted to love other people but you weren't free because of the hatred that rankled inside you. Now you are free to obey him.

Some people have called it perfect love. You find your heart filled with a perfect love for God and a perfect love for your brothers and sisters. You find that you have pure intentions. That's one of the big changes that your intentions become pure. I remember often standing up in front of people

with the intention to glorify God but also the intention to glorify myself a little. So, the intention was not pure. It was double minded rather than a single-minded love of the Father.

Now the Holy Spirit, when he cleanses and fills you, gives you an intention that is devoted to glorifying and pleasing God in every way within your power. Now, that's why brothers and sisters, the Bible at times describes it as really constituting an ability to do what you know is right and an ability to avoid what you know is wrong. You know that those are things that make our life miserable and defeated Christians.

It's not the things we don't know about that trouble us. It's the things we know we should do and cannot do. It's the thing that we want to stop doing and we can't stop. Those are the things that destroy us and that bring guilt. Now, the Holy Spirit fills you so that you can do that. It puts you in the position of James 4:17 if you like to look at it.

James 4:17, is where God defines sin very clearly, "Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin". God says, if you know what you ought to do and you don't do it, that's sin. If you know what you should stop doing and you can't do it, that's sin. When the Holy Spirit comes, he delivers you from that resistance to God's will so that you are free to avoid what you know you should avoid. That's why the Bible takes the further step and makes that strong statement in the verse we read in the lesson, 1 John 3:9, which many of us are very slow about believing.

1 John 3:9, "No one borne of God commits sin", that's what God means. The Holy Spirit frees you from the resistance to God's will that you had before. He frees you from that tremendous desire to defy self and to have your own way. You are free at last to do what you know is right and of course if you do what you know is right then you are not committing sin. God says, "Sin is knowing, conscious, disobedience to my will and what my Holy Spirit does through the application of the death and crucifixion of Jesus to your selfish will is, he frees you to obey me."

That's why that verse goes even further and some of us you know may have a little difficulty with it. You see it in 1John 3:9B, "No one borne of God commits sin for God's nature abides in him and he cannot sin because he is borne of God". Well, that's why John puts it so strongly. I suppose, actually you could sin if you wanted to. You're always free to sin but at last you're free not to sin which you never were before. And so in a sense, obeying God becomes as natural to you as obeying Satan was before.

Sin becomes as alien to your whole being as obeying God used to be before. In a sense, it becomes quite difficult for a person to sin. They have to make a conscious determination to disobey God after the Holy Spirit has cleansed them from that resistance to God's will.

Now loved ones, could I tackle the little wood worms that are trying to get into our heads at this moment. One of them is saying, "Sinless perfection", that's what it is, sinless perfection. They are urging you to get a stake and burn me but this is an asbestos suit! So, now dear ones, first of all it isn't sinless perfection, I'll explain why in a moment, but let's look at how far we've fallen.

When we put a phrase like 'sinless perfection', which I wouldn't attempt to defend, it's too hot an item. We put a phrase like 'sinless perfection' in the same category as bad breath. We reckon if we label something 'sinless perfection', then that's it condemned without questions.

Now loved ones, I urge you to be slow on that kind of thinking since we all will probably have to

put up with a lot of sinless perfection for eternity. We should go a little gentle on downgrading it or using it as a term of opprobrium, a term of contempt, a term of criticism. Let's look at what we're talking about. Is it sinless perfection?

Brothers and sisters, the victorious life, a life filled with the Holy Spirit is a life that is delivered from resistance to God's will. It's a life that is delivered from that inward desire to defy and glorify self. It is a life that has been freed to obey. It is not an automaton kind of life. It is not a robot life. You can still disobey if you want to but it is a life that has been freed from the weight inside that prevented it obeying. But it still has to obey.

It is a life that still has to obey and as soon as you say that brothers and sisters, you are involving yourself in other parts of the personality besides the will. You can say the will has been freed to obey but the way you obey God is by your lips, by your tongue, with your body, with your mind and with your emotions. Now obedience is involved with those other free parts of your personality, your body, your emotions and your mind.

Now, do you see that one of the effects of living without the Holy Spirit for years and in mankind for centuries was, that our minds became impaired and so our minds often are slow and incapable of perceiving what God wants at the time and so often we will make mistakes. Often you will think that a certain approach to another person will draw them towards God and it'll just put them off completely and you'll make an absolute mistake about the whole thing.

Often you will quote a fact that isn't true at all and the other person will hear the fact, will look it up in book, find it isn't true and he'll just say those Christians are just con man. So again and again you'll find that you're doing your best with a man that often makes mistakes. You'll be in the position that Peter was, you remember in Galatians 2.

You might want to look at it, it's the last reference, I'll ask you to look up dear ones and it is one instance of a person whose will was delivered but he was an apostle and certainly he showed that his mind was still trying to work out the best way and at times making mistakes about it.

Gal 2:11-13, "But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity."

Now brothers and sisters, in the light of Peter's letters and the life of suffering that he endured, you cannot say that Peter was scared of what people would think. He already thought that one out with the little girl in the courtyard when Jesus was being tried. But what Peter was involved in was, a real error of judgment.

He first of all thought, that the heathen needed to become Jews before they became Christians. And so he started to eat with the Gentiles. Then he began to think, "Well maybe that's not true. Maybe I shouldn't offend the Jews and I'd better stay away from the Gentiles." Of course, Paul differed with him completely and accused him of acting insincerely.

Now dear ones, do you see that often we will deviate from absolute perfection because of the imperfections of our minds? Often we'll make mistakes in judgments. Often we'll commit unintentional sins that we don't realize we committed until it's done. Then we look back and we say, "Oh I did

that, I shouldn't have done it".

Well, the Father is just. He has his arms open towards you. He is not standing up there condemning you for something that was unintentional and that was done in a moment before you realized. In other words, if you want to call them sins, call them sins, though the Bible does say that a sin is what you know is wrong. If you want to say that your life can have some unintentional sins in it, it can have mistakes in it, it can have voluntary deviations from God's absolute perfection that you didn't really intend.

Now loved ones, do you see that means that you can't be said to be in absolute perfection. You can't be said to be living in sinless perfection if you're living with some mistaken moves, some things that you didn't really intend to do and yet they deviate from absolute perfection. So a better word is perfect obedience.

It's true too that our emotions have become unbalanced. Some of you are just very emotional people. And some of us are very cold. Because of that, we deviate from God's absolute perfection in both directions even though we intend the best. You want that person to know how glad you are that they're here at the theater, but you are a "gusher". You gush, "Yes, just like that". You just gush out the emotionalism and you swamp them with all kinds of paternal and maternal love. You suffocate the poor souls and they vow "never again"! It's not that you intended to hurt them or you designed to glorify self. It's just that the emotions have not really come into complete balance and the affections are not yet under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Some of us are the same in the other direction. We're Scandinavian with no emotions. Now, that's not true but we tend to be colder and don't show much emotion. We love the people with all our hearts but they go away thinking they don't care about you at all. Do you see that strictly speaking you're deviating from absolute perfection? It's not a deviation that has malice in it or that is designed to get your own way or to disobey God.

It's similar with your body. Our bodies are weakened by the years that we've lived without the power of the Holy Spirit -- the years that we've lived in psychosomatic diseases, in strains of all kinds. Our bodies are weakened and repeatedly, Satan will move in a temptation through these weakened bodies. He will move through bodies that have become used to certain patterns of behavior, through bodies that submit to flu and colds, and through bodies that press in on the spirit.

In a thousand ways, you will deviate from God's absolute perfection because of the pressure of the body. So brothers and sisters, in many ways I am sure that you will not live a life of sinless perfection. But the beauty of it is that those things that have come to you that way do not bring guilt. They bring an immediate sense that the Father understands when you say, "Lord you know that I didn't intend that". There's the beauty of Jesus' love and forgiveness that comes down to you and the thing is adjusted in a moment by a quick adjustment.

The truth of the victorious life is that the Holy Spirit delivers you from self, delivers you from that desire to disobey God, and to hold resentment and antagonism towards another person. The Holy Spirit can fill you with a pure intention and a life and a heart of perfect love and that is like living in heaven. You cannot step back from that definition that the Holy Spirit delivers you into a life where you're freed from sin. That's what Romans 6:18 says, "You're freed from sin and you become a slave of righteousness."

Now as the Holy Spirit gives you more and more light, you can come increasingly free of that natural soul life that we just outlined there in connection with the mind and emotions in the body and that we normally talk about in the Sunday evenings services in the fall and the winter. We can be gradually disciplined by the Holy Spirit so that even the soulish powers become subservient servants and effective expressions of the life of Jesus.

I purposely want to stop and give an opportunity for a question, since many may be troubled about this.

Question: "What do we do if we are not yet delivered from self?"

Answer: You walk in the light brothers and sisters, that's what Jesus promised.

If we walk in the light as he is in the light, the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from all sin, known and unknown. You walk in the light. You hunger and thirst after the deliverance from self that Calvary brings. If you say to me, "But brother, I am not free of it yet." Well, the Father is not going to condemn one who is hungering and thirsting after his righteousness -- one who is standing against that resistance in his heart with all his power that he can muster. Even if he is still doing it in his own strength, God will make the revelation real to you of your death with Jesus, if you're walking on in the light.

We have a loving Father and not a great judge. We have a loving Father who wants to do everything to deliver us into a free life. Let us pray.