

Law

Romans 7:1

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Last Sunday, you remember we dealt with the question: why do you regard this book [the Bible] as a reliable explanation of reality, of the whole world and of our own lives and really of why we're here? And you remember the answer we gave was that this book is a historical record of the way the person who made the earth and the universe has revealed himself to thousands and thousands of different people over 4000 years of time. We said that that was so much more empirical evidence than the evidence of the other non-Christian scriptures which tend to be just unsubstantiated accounts of mystical visions that their authors have had. They tend to be just accounts of what their authors thought the Creator of the world was like but they're not substantiated and they are not reinforced and you can't check them against other things or corroborate them against other histories. So that, you remember, is how we answered the question.

But really dear ones, there's a far more existential reason for accepting this book as the explanation of reality. And it is this: that the Bible has an uncanny ability to give answers to real life questions that are far deeper than any other answers that you get in any other academic discipline. You find again and again that the Bible makes other answers to life's problems seem superficial. It makes the answers that psychology gives or philosophy gives, seem to be only partial answers and yet the Bible itself seems to integrate many of the best truths that these academic disciplines have revealed. So really, there's every reason for accepting the Bible as a reliable explanation of reality just by comparing its answers with the answers that other academic disciplines provide. And that, for many of us, is a more influential and existential reason than perhaps just the historical record.

I think we found this as true in several issues. You remember the issue that C.J. Young, the psychologist, brought up as the great disease of the 20th century: guilt. You remember how the Bible in Romans 5 deals with that whole problem of guilt -- and we spent all of two years ago, dealing with it and all my sermons are on cassettes, I am not going to try to answer it but you could look it up if you want to know. But you remember in Romans 5, God deals with that whole problem of guilt. Or you take the other problem that hits us all and that Dostoyevsky deals with in his novels. The problem of that inner selfish will inside us that so often seems to want to burst out and do the most horrible things; it's like a Dr. Jekyll inside us that we can't control. ["Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" by Robert Louis Stevenson] You remember how in Romans 6, the Bible deals with that whole problem of that inner selfish will.

Now, as we go into Romans 7, maybe it's good to see that the Bible is beginning to deal with another issue that many of us have difficulties with in different ways, and that's the whole problem of law, the whole issue of law. I really do think, brothers and sisters, that a lot of us here in the theater are under a lot of the depression and oppression that we experience from time to time because we have not a right attitude to law or because we have a fascination or fixation with laws that God really is not imposing upon us. But I do believe that many of us get into real trouble in our own personal lives because we have a wrong attitude to law and that's really what God begins to deal with in Romans 7.

Now, there are some of you here who come from seminaries and who come from Bible colleges and that

kind of thing, so you're really interested in exegetical and practical theology. Now for you -- all the rest can close their ears and go to sleep -- no, but for you, it might be important, dear ones, to point out that Romans is not a chronological diary of Paul's personal experience.

It's not a chronological account of successive experiences that he went through. In other words, it's not Romans 5, "He was delivered from guilt". Romans 6, "He was delivered from the selfish will". Romans 7, "He was delivered from law". It isn't that. It's a theological treatise that does not go in chronological order and that deals with topics or issues that spoil our relationship with God. And really, in many ways you can put Romans 7 before Romans 6 if you wanted to, if you wanted to get a chronological pattern developing. So maybe it's important just to say that because I think a lot of people say, "Oh, Paul seems to have got clear of the selfish will in Romans 6 and then he seems to be having problems with it in Romans 7." The two chapters deal with different issues. One deals with the inner enemy and rebel within, the other deals with the attitude to law after you've been delivered from that enemy and the importance of making it all consistent.

So having given the theological lecture then, maybe we could begin. It's Romans 7:1, and let's start as God does through Paul, very simply. And as the chapter goes on, maybe towards the end of 1974, we'll begin to see some deeper things as we get to the end of it. Romans 7:1, "Do you not know, brethren --- for I am speaking to those who know the law --- that the law is binding on a person only during his life?" So, Paul says, "Don't you know that the law is binding on a person only during his life?" Now "the law", some people may look at it in that way, [Pastor O'Neill is writing on a board] it would be "honomus", wouldn't it, in Greek? And they would say, "Oh that means the Ten Commandments, the Judaistic law", but no, it doesn't.

It's a generic term and it means "law, generally". "Law generally" is binding on a person only during his life and that's true, you know. Throughout the world, all of us have an inexplicable obligation within us to live up to certain standards. Isn't that true? However inconvenient the standards are, we have that obligation -- and that's the more remarkable thing: that usually the standards are very inconvenient for us.

Usually we'd rather get mad. Usually we'd rather get rid of the person that is causing us trouble -- but in spite of that fact, there seems to be within all of us human beings, a tremendous obligation within to live up to certain standards and it exists everywhere and in all parts of life. That's what Paul means.

Law is binding on every one of us as long as we're alive. You go into Wilson Library. You sit down at a desk, put your books down, study for half an hour, and then you go to check a reference. While you're away somebody else comes back and sits down in your place. Then you return and there they are, sitting there. All your books were out there but they are sitting right on your spot and you know the way it goes. You say to them, "That's my place. I was there first, and would you please move," and if they decide not to move, you know the way the argument goes. You start saying, "No, that's not fair. I was there first," and the argument continues with words like that and he normally or she normally doesn't say, "I don't care whether it's fair or not", they normally accept your argument.

Yeah, there are fair things and there are unfair things and there are standards that we both accept and all right, let's conduct the argument on that basis. And usually disagreements and arguments proceed on that basis -- that you're both appealing to some kind of standard of fairness that you have a way in the back of your minds and normally, you don't ignore each other's standard. You try

to show that your action fits in with the standard. So you say, "I give you a piece of my orange, will you give me a piece of yours", and we kind of sense, now everybody understands. I mean if one gives a part of one's orange to somebody then they ought to give a part of their orange to them and we all kind of take it for granted. Now that's accepted. Nobody but a Martian would disagree with that. And all the time brothers and sisters, every disagreement, every argument we have, whatever nation we're from, we have this assumption deep down that there are things that are fair and there are things that are unfair; it doesn't matter how immoral the person is.

If you get down to the last bit with them, there are certain things that they think are fair and certain things that they don't think are fair and so every disagreement and argument proceeds on that basis. They're trying to show that their action fits in with the standard and your action doesn't but rarely do they ever say, "I don't care about your standard. I don't care whether it's fair or unfair, that's the way it's going to be." It does seem that deep down within us there's this kind of moral law and it stays there whatever we're like.

Really loved ones, it's that that holds our tentative little society together, really it is. It's that thing inside us that has a general understanding of standards that holds us together. I think that's why Watergate [a political scandal in America] caused such shudders. I think that was really it. Suddenly we found our leaders saying, "Those standards that you feel are so inherent in you, that are so much a part of you? Those standards don't operate in certain situations. You can burgle and steal, you can thief, you can tell lies, and you can break promises, if it's for national security or if it's for Presidential confidentiality." And deep down many of us felt, "Oh"; we feel like crying out, "Look, you're destroying a deeper security that we all have in order to preserve something that you call national security."

Many of us felt like crying out, "Look, those are the only standards we have to govern life. If you throw those over, we have nothing left." Loved ones, deep down I think all of us, however deep an understanding we have of philosophy or psychology, deep down all of us have an understanding that if you don't stand more or less by those things that we feel are right, the whole thing will break up in chaos. And it was that same thing I think that made many of us concerned about some of the more violent protest marches.

We wonder, "Is this nihilism going to overthrow these things within us that we feel we ought to abide by." And I think that was a lot of our problem in this whole Watergate business. I don't know that it was just that they did the things but it's that they did them and then told us, "These things are okay in the light of certain purposes that you have to fulfill." And we all felt, "No, you could preserve our national security and destroy our personal security if you keep going like that." It is amazing dear ones, that those things exist in every society, really. Those standards exist in every society. We keep on saying you see, "Oh it's just because we have the Bible in America." No, those standards exist in every society and that's what God was getting at when He made that statement through Paul in Romans 2:14-15a. The Father was pointing out to us that everybody has a set of standards within them that they feel an obligation to live up to.

Romans 2:14-15a, "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them," and that's true. It doesn't matter whether you study the morals of the Hindus or the Babylonians or the Arabs or the Chinese, doesn't matter whether you study the morals of the Romans or the Greeks, you'll find that none of them approve of cowards, none of them

think it's good to run away in battle, none of them approve of traitors, none of them think it's good to let down your friends or to betray them, none of them it's a good thing to do harm to someone who has been kind to you, none of them think that selfishness is a good thing, doesn't matter how primitive the tribe is, none of them believe that selfishness is a good thing.

They may disagree about the people to whom you ought to be unselfish. Some of them may say, "It's our family. It's our own inner circle." Some of them may say, "It's our tribe," some of them who are more enlightened may say, "Everybody in the world," but none of them agree that selfishness is good.

In other words, it doesn't matter which people you go into, you find that there is a law that is binding on all of them that comes from inside them and they cannot explain. Now how do you explain the origin of that law? Well, a lot of philosophers have tried to explain it within our close mechanistic universe. That is, they've tried to explain it as something that came from inside our own world.

You run into real problems when you get into that, because the fact is that this standard inside us is always busy contradicting the things that we most want to do and so it's very hard to explain where it originated from. It seems to oppose some of the most vehement desires that we have in our lives. Some psychologists have said, "Oh, it's just an instinct," just an instinct, this moral law inside us is just an instinct and yet at times it judges between instincts. You find a man that is drowning, and there's a herd instinct that makes you want to save him and there's a self-preservation instinct that wants you to keep away from the water -- and yet the moral law or the conscience seems to come in and judge between those instincts.

So it's really hard, dear ones, to just say it's an instinct. Some people say, "Oh it's just a convention of society," yeah, but it's interesting that so many societies have the same convention. In fact, all societies seem to have broad conventions about what you can do and what you can't do. So it's really difficult, dear ones, to explain it in terms of our closed mechanistic universe, in terms of something we men and women have originated ourselves. Really, the explanation and the deepest one (and I think you'll find it in following Sundays), the most real one is the one given in Genesis 1:27, if you look at it.

Genesis 1:27, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." And the answer that this book gives is that God made us like himself and gave us a mind and emotions and a will like he had. And the only way these things would work was by allowing the uncreated life that poured through him to pour through us. And we rejected that life but the old mind, emotions and will were originally made to work in a certain way and they have a built-in memory of that, almost like someone who has been trained for years to do something and then for years, they don't do it but somehow their whole mechanism was used to doing that for so many years that it still has a desire to do it again.

Really that's part of the explanation for this desire inside us to behave in certain ways -- that God actually made us, dear ones, to live in sunshine and to live in peace and perfect love and to live in unselfish sharing between him and his Son and to live with the Holy Spirit of his generous life pouring through us and our mind, emotions and will -- and our whole personalities are made to operate that way and they still preserve that as a kind of primeval memory within them. It's almost a memory of sunshine back there somewhere. A memory that once was good and that it once could have been beautiful and that really we have this because God made us to work in a certain way and we still remember that.

And that's really what conscience is all about, and when you sense a desire that you ought to do a certain thing, it actually is your Maker whispering to you, "Look, I did make you for something better than you are and I did make you to be a far bigger person than you are at this moment and I did make you to be bigger than the petty little things that you feel and think inside." And loved ones every time that law speaks inside you, it's the Father trying to remind you that you were made for great things and that you were really made to be a saint and it's so ridiculous that the world has begun to normalize sinner life as if it's the norm.

You were really made to be like him, that's really what it's all about, you know. I'll tell you what the Father did when he saw we rejected the uncreated life and decided to do it ourselves. He said at the beginning, "Okay, I'll let you do it yourself," and that's why we read that piece for our lesson. From Adam to Noah, the Father said, "All right. You don't want my uncreated life? Okay, I'll let you see what happens when you don't have it." And loved ones, the whole world plunged into licentiousness and chaos.

God actually had to come along and destroy the whole thing and that's what he did you remember in the flood and it was then that he began to introduce to us something that would reinforce that law that we feel within us. It was then that he began to give external laws. You'll see it if you like to look at it just for a moment, it's in Genesis 9:6. After the flood which God had to bring to destroy the chaos that we then produced by our licentiousness and our abuse of freedom verse 6 is the beginning of God giving us some external laws that would reinforce that standard within.

Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." That was a tremendous advance on what they had. God began to introduce the idea of justice and then right down through the years, he kept introducing things that would say to us, "If you'd let my uncreated life flow through you, this is the way you'd behave. For instance, you wouldn't have any other Gods before me. You'd remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. You wouldn't covet, you wouldn't lust, you wouldn't steal, and you wouldn't kill. If you would only let my uncreated life flow through you, this is the way you'd be." And so the Father gave us an external list of symptoms that would reinforce this desire that is inside us.

Now dear ones, that's why it's such a universal thing -- because that was passed down through the years among all peoples. It got corrupted in some people. It was preserved purely among the Jews but in other nations and in other countries and among the Chinese, among the Babylonians, it became corrupted but it still was there and it's still the basis of their penal systems. They may be miserably corrupted and when we go to those countries, we may think, "Oh, they have no idea of law," but that still is the corrupted memory of the desire that God put in them at the very beginning of the world and of the standards that their forefathers remember. They have stories, dear ones, every nation has corrupted stories of the Fall, you know that. Even the old story of Pandora's Box is in its way a corrupted version of the Fall but every nation -- the Greeks, the Romans, the Babylonians, the Chinese, the Arabs -- every nation has corrupted memories of the accounts that we have in Genesis. They all point back to the fact that this law which all of us feel binding upon us, has been given us by the Creator who made us to live in a different way from the way we're living.

You remember Paul says that the law is binding upon us as long as we live. Well, maybe it's good to see that yes, the Greek word is "archontes" and it means "lords it over us" and the law lords it over us, loved ones, because we do not have the uncreated life of God that automatically fulfills so it also explains that. If we were receiving the uncreated life of the Holy Spirit, we wouldn't have trouble with the laws. We wouldn't have trouble with law in our own life. We'd find suddenly that

our conscience was a delight. That it was a real feast -- not something that, oh just smelled and that we just had to keep down and ignore -- but it would be a beautiful thing and it's a tremendous assurance you get when your conscience suddenly seems to be approving of all your actions and all your words. Now loved ones, that's the Father's will -- not that we should be schizophrenics at all but that really our conscience should align itself exactly with our lives and our lives should align themselves exactly with our conscience.

So would you stop saying, "These miserable inhibitions that my grandmother passed on to me," or would you stop saying "These old Victorian heresies that I have inside me, I have to get rid of them." Oh would you stop saying that? Those are beautiful memories, loved ones, of the sunshine days when the Father intended us to live in perfect love with each other and every time you respond to those, you move into the sunshine of God's Spirit. So, even if it's you driving 38 mph and it's a 30 mph speed limit and you just glanced down -- even if it's the law in that, okay, cut her down to 30 mph. And if it's a little bit of a hesitation inside, "you shouldn't have spoken to that person just as cuttingly as that", then apologize, get it right, pay attention to that.

It's good that the law is binding on every one of us during our lifetime. It's a precious guide to us that if we follow it, we'll move into the sunshine of God's Spirit and it is true, loved ones. You'll find it, honestly, if you'll just take the courage to stop doing the thing that God is giving you doubts about. Now loved ones, it's applicable in all areas. Next day, I hope that when we get into the whole business of the divorce and marriage, I hope that the Father will show us how it's applicable there in those relationships but it's applicable in every area. So let's not be sophisticated 20th century people who despise the old Victorians. It's not the Victorians; they made a mess of it often but it's the Father that gave us those things. Let us pray.

Father, we have sensed in these days of Watergate, a real lack of an anchor, a real lack of stability. Father, we see what would happen if we rebel completely against the law. So Father we thank you for the law within us. We thank you for that little voice that we've so often quelled and quashed as just our human inhibitions. We thank you for that advice and Father, we commit ourselves to beginning to listen to it.

Lord, with some of us it's grown so faint that we can hardly hear it. Some of us, our Father, have so normalized a situation of a life lived independent of you that we hardly know that there is any other way to live but Father we trust you this morning to continue to speak inside us. Father we thank you that our minds will never be satisfied until they work the way you meant them to work.

We thank you that our emotions will never be satisfied living off other people but only when they begin to live off you and of your Spirit. So Lord, we commit ourselves to abiding by the law that is binding upon us as long as we're here in this world and we're glad we have the opportunity to do it for your glory. Amen.