

External Law or Internal Restraint?

Romans 7:4

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

In Ireland, I wasn't an evangelical at all. I was wild, happy-go-lucky liberal and one of the things that put me off evangelical Christians was their negativism. It seemed that they were distinguishing themselves from other people in the world by what they didn't do rather than be what they did do and so, some of the groups even seemed to have all their five carnal sins. You don't drink, you don't damn, you don't smoke, you don't go to the theater and you don't play cards. It just seem so silly to me, it seems so unlike Jesus and all the positive love that he appeared to have. So, I really couldn't understand how they had got into it at all but certainly they had and then I saw brothers and sisters, parts of the Bible that prophesied that people would do that kind of thing. It might be good to look at one of them just to settle the issue for us, ourselves and our own attitudes because I think some of us get into it also.

Colossians 2:16-17, Paul obviously is facing some of the same kind of influence in the church at Colossi and he says, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." Then in Colossians 2:20, "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belong to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh."

For a while, I tried some of it myself and I really did see that that was true that I could fall into a lot of the habit that the particular group that I belonged to, wanted me to practice and that brought me their respect but it didn't do anything for the problem inside that was filled with wrong feelings and wrong attitude. Nevertheless, loved ones, I think you'll agree that anybody who wanted to be balanced emotionally and physically and mentally would probably not practice these things or if they did practice them, they'd probably monitor them very carefully, that is you'd probably monitor very carefully, what you did drink or how often you did damn so whether you did good or the other and presumably some of us would agree with the medics that many of those things actually destroy our bodies.

So I don't think it was that I disagreed with what they were saying. Most of it was quite good. Most of it, it has taken the medics a long time to catch up with it especially in regard to smoking. So it wasn't that I disagreed with the standards but it was that I felt it was so negative. It was rather the emphasis that they laid on being remarkable as Christians for what you didn't do rather than for what you did to. In other words, really these brothers and sisters had fallen into legalism and that's a well known heresy in the first century, legalism, and it's an attitude to the law that you and I can get caught up with very easily. On the other hand, many of us who have been very critical of the legalists and very critical of the extreme fundamentalists have fallen into the opposite kind of heresy because there are many of us who say, "Oh you're right pastor. That's a silly negative, miserable way to live the Christian life. The truth is that Jesus has died for us so that we don't need to bother with what we do and whether we obey the law or not. We're freed from the law. We don't need to bother with it. We're freed not only from its penalties but we're freed

from its obligations. God is no longer interested in the kind of life we're living; all he's interested in is us believing in Jesus."

Of course brothers and sisters, that is falling into the other heresy. It's falling into what they called antinomianism, 'anti' - against and 'nomos', you remember in Greek law, 'against law'. It's falling into the behavior that says, "It doesn't matter what kind of life I live, God's going to accept me at the end to himself anyway." Now dear ones, it is true that God's loving us whatever we're like but it's not true that he can accept us whatever we're like. You got that kind of heresy in the early church too. It's mentioned in by Peter, if you look at it, II Peter 2. That might be good just to know that verse because I think there are people who talk this way today. Peter talks about these antinomians a great length in this letter.

II Peter 2:18-20, "For, uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions of the flesh men who have barely escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first." And what Peter is talking about there is antinomianism.

There were great many of us certainly in the liberal camp who fell into that pattern. We said, "God used to say obey the law, now he says believe in Jesus. That's all you have to do. You can forget about obeying the law." The amazing thing is though all of you will join with me and seeing the fallacies of those first century heresies, isn't this the truth that many of us here even in the theater are a little uncertain about our attitude to the law? Whether we're Christians or not, we're a little uncertain and we find ourselves falling into antinomianism at times, not caring what we're doing and saying, "Well, Lord, you're going to accept me whatever I do, because of your blood", and falling into the other pattern, where we become legalistic about what we're eating or how we're dressing or how we're behaving.

Now I think that God knew that some of us were going to make a mess of the law in that way and that's why he dealt with that at such length. Dear ones, that's what Paul talks about in Romans 7, you know. He talks about our attitude to the law and today's verse says something very definite about it that I have hope God will use to bring freedom to some of us. Romans 7:4, "Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we might bear fruit for God." What I'd like us to share a wee bit is in what sense we've died to the law.

Do you remember what the purpose of the law was? I know I have mentioned it often and you probably remember the same purpose as a doctor would have at a time of plague in giving certain regulations. That's the same as God had in mind when he gave us the moral law. Take a doctor in the midst of an epidemic of yellow fever, he does two things. First of all he says, "Look, if you have any discoloration in your complexion, any tendency to jaundice, okay you've got the fever". So he tells them first of all what the signs are, so that they'll know they're sick and know they have to be treated.

Secondly, he'll say to them, "Look shut yourself up in your house and keep yourself apart from everybody else so that you don't infect others". So he'll try to limit the spread of the disease. Now brothers and sisters, that's what God had in mind when he gave us the law. It wasn't actually given to make us healthy, it was given to let us know the signs that would show that there was

something wrong inside us and secondly it was given to try to limit the spread of the disease as much as he could.

So you can see those two things dear ones, if you look at Romans 3:20, there's that first purpose of the law, stated just very plainly. Romans 3:20, "For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law." So you can't please God just through obeying the law, "Since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Now that's that first purpose. God gave us a law so that we know when we had a sickness inside. He gave us it as a kind of diagnostic method of finding out, "Have I got yellow fever? Am I sick? Am I not right in my relationship to the center of the universe?" That's why he gave us the law to let us know whether we had the disease or not.

Second reason is there in Galatians 3:23, "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed." That's the second purpose. God gave the law to try to limit the chaos we might cause by our own attitude and our own sickness. Those are the two purposes and you might say, "Oh what's so terrible about the disease that it requires that kind of treatment and that kind of quarantine? What is so lethal about it that it requires that kind of dealing by God?" You know yourself what the disease was. God planned and made us to enjoy his company and his son's company so that we'd do that, he made available to us, oh a life power that was the same as what flowed through his own character, kind of really like the blood of God, it was. It was a special uncreated life that if we would receive would make us like him and would of course enable us to fellowship with him forever with real enjoyment.

It was almost like a kind of DNA that would pattern us after our Creator miraculously and so he made available to us this Holy Spirit life and his plan was that we would receive that life and that life would integrate our minds so that we would be able to use the world without abusing it to provide ourselves with food and shelter and clothing in the right proportions and share them among everybody and we would be able to do that with our minds under the control of this Spirit life without destroying the world, without abusing it, without polluting it, we would be able to get energy from the world that we needed without draining it of all its resources.

This Spirit also balanced our emotions so that we would be able to love other people, we would be freed from ourselves and able to love other people freely as if they were our very own selves and as result of this, of course, we begin to get a great sense of approval and fulfillment from the Creator of the universe himself as we were used to bring his order and will throughout his universe, that was God's plan.

You know we rejected the whole deal. We rejected this blood of God, you might call it or this life force of God, this invisible substance that was odorless and tasteless that he undertook on his own promise to put into our being. If we would only love him above ourselves, we rejected this stuff and we said, "No, we'll do it on our own", of course our minds became utterly disintegrated and instead of using our minds to use the world we used them just to abuse the world. So we tore hunks of coal out of cliffs. We carried on strip mining without any regard to the vegetation. We drilled for oil and oceans whether we could control the oil outflow at all or not. So we made ourselves methods of getting around that simply suffocated and choked each other and we began to use our minds not in order to develop the world as God wanted to, but in order to manipulate and use the world and use other people for our own benefits and for our own sakes.

So we lost all sense of doing anything for the Creator of the universe and we instead, took the position of the Creator of the universe and we said, "I am God. I am going to use the whole universe

for my benefit." So it wasn't long before we felt everybody else was in competition with us, instead of our emotions being balanced, we actually used everybody else to satisfy our emotions and to give ourselves pleasure and joy and so in actual fact, we became gods, all of us. Now that's the disease dear ones, that's the sickness.

You could call it whatever you like but it's independence of our Creator, it's self-centeredness, it's a desire to live life for our own purposes. It's the whole attitude to everybody else that regards him as enemies, as rivals and competitors not as dear brothers and sisters of ours and that whole attitude is called in the Bible sin, or self and God therefore was faced with that kind of a disease spreading throughout his universe. He knew the next thing we would do is we'd all settle on different planets because we had the power to do that, with this Holy Spirit life, we had the power to go and control the whole universe.

He knew the next thing we'd settle on different planets then we'd send rockets against each other before any of us knew it the whole universe would share the chaos that our world shares. And that was the situation dear ones in what the Bible calls the 'period of freedom', because God is very good, you know, he is a dear Father, far wiser than we are and he said, "Okay, I'll let them go. I'll let them see what they're doing", and so he gave us a period of freedom where there were no restraints at all, no law, no nothing and that's called the dispensation of self-determination or the dispensation of freedom or the dispensation of conscience.

God just let us go. He said, "All right, I'll let you do it your way, without the power of my life", and the result is stated there in Genesis, if you want to look at it. Genesis 6:5-6, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." That was after several thousands of years, dear ones, of man living like that. God saw that there was only one final solution and he states that in Genesis 6:7, "So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." And God saw that the only thing he could do was destroy us because the disease was so intricately connected with us, because the disease was really self, the disease was really 'me'. It was Ernest O'Neill, it was Leighton Carlson, it was Roger Young, it was your name. That was the disease.

It was us, ourselves that were disease and God saw the only thing he could do was wipe us out and loved ones, he did wipe the world out you remember. He wiped it out with a flood that is the tested to geologically throughout the world. He wiped the whole universe out, the whole world of men out except for one man Noah. Now why he did that was to symbolize that that is eventually what he'd have to do in order to deal with the sickness and so the flood loved ones, was not a final solution to the problem at all, it was simply a symbol, "Look, this is what I'll have to do to get rid of this thing inside you because it's so intimately connected up with you", indeed it is you yourself. It's your selfishness and your self-centeredness.

But he knew that we, ourselves were not ready to receive the solution of which that flood was only a type. He knew that we weren't yet convinced that this deification of self and this self glorification was so bad that it had to be dealt with in that way and that's why loved ones, he let us go on with just two actions on his part. He gave us a set of laws to show us when we were filled with self-glorification and he gave us a set of laws to control the self-glorification from destroying his world until he brought the final solution himself and that's where law comes in.

It was brought in by God to preserve the universe from absolute extension by your selfishness and my selfishness, by your hatred and my hatred until God convinced us that that self-glorification and self-deification and self-centeredness that ran our lives was going to destroy everything that we touched.

So the law, you can see, was given just as a temporary measure and that's mentioned dear ones, in Galatians 3:24-25 and it's good to see that it was a temporary measure given by God for that purpose to expose to us the resistance to God's will that was inside us and to restrain it until that rebellious power could be destroyed. Galatians 3:24-25, "So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith." So the law was a custodian you see, until Christ came, but now that faith has come, you are no longer under a custodian.

So God saw that if he could somehow get rid of the disease you wouldn't need to custodian. If you could get rid of the yellow fever, you wouldn't need the regulations to restrain the yellow fever and you wouldn't need the regulations in order for people to diagnose the disease because the disease would be destroyed. So the law was only a custodian, a temporary arrangement to reveal where we were to ourselves and to restrain us until God would bring the final solution. You remember that final solution was the destruction of that desire for self that we had inside ourselves. That desire to be God ourselves, to take the position of the Creator of the universe and what was required was the destruction of that power of self inside us.

Dear ones, that's what happened 1900 years later. That's what happened in Jesus on the Cross. The word destruction even is used if you look at it there in Romans 6 and this was the only final solution to this selfish drive. Romans 6:6, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." In other words, the body and the mind, and the emotions, that had been used to existing as if there was no God but we, ourselves, that was going to be destroyed. That body that had been used to being used by that self force, that made us think of ourselves as the center of the universe, that was destroyed, the moment the old force of self was crucified with Christ. And of course once that is done, then you can see the law itself is no longer needed.

Once that happens, once a man or a woman really accepts that his life is not his own and that he has not the right to manipulate others and to manipulate the world for his own enjoyment and once he is ready or she is ready at last to look to God for everything that he or she needs, once they're ready to die to their rights to use everybody for their own purposes, then God infuses into that person, this uncreated life of the Holy Spirit. And of course that Holy Spirit brings health, integrates the mind so that you begin to use the world and not abuse it, integrates the emotions and balances them so that you begin to be able to love other people because you're freed from your self.

Then, at last the law is no longer needed and that's God's will for us that we would come into that kind of experience. Once the disease is removed, you don't need the method of regulating the disease or you don't need even the symptoms of the disease to expose to you that you're sick and that's God's will. Now maybe you'd say, "Well then brother, what is the attitude of say those of us who have accepted that we have no right to ourselves and that God has every right to destroy that self force inside us and that selfishness. What is our attitude to the law?"

Well, dear ones it depends a great deal on whether the resistance to God's will is still alive in you or whether it's really dead. If it's still alive in you and you try to use the law as a mirror, that's the way the law should be used. I should learn to pronounce that as Minnesotans do, mirror but I can't, but mirror, you've to use, there's certain things you can't change. If you're going to

use the law as a mirror which is God's plan for us who have allowed ourselves to be crucified with Christ; if you're going to use the law as a mirror, when you look into it and you see something in it that shows you that you could please God more than you're doing and that's his plan for the use of the law for those of us who are Christians.

We're to use the law as a mirror, not to diagnose a disease, not to restrain the sin that is within us but we're to use it as a mirror. "Lord, is there any way I can please you more", and then we look into that mirror and we see, "Yeah", you talk to loud" or, "Yeah, there's still some greed in your life", or, "Yeah, there's still some lust in your life", "You still will commit adultery in your heart." When we look into that mirror, if we're really allowing the Holy Spirit to destroy the resistance to God's will inside us and we're really willing to live for God alone, then we'll respond to it joyfully and we'll say, "Thank you Father", and we'll walk right on into the obedience that he is asking but loved ones, if the resistance to God's will is still in you, if you're still anxious to live life for yourself, if you still have a desire for self's rights and self's way, then you'll fall into either legalism or antinomianism, that's right.

So it's a good test if you find yourself all preoccupied with, "Am I doing this right? Am I doing this wrong? Should I be doing this? Should I be dressing this way? Am I pleasing this person? Am I pleasing that person? Am I fulfilling the law here? Am I fulfilling the law there?" If you find yourself utterly preoccupied with legalism, "Am I doing it right", then be assured that deep down inside you the disease has not been destroyed and that's why that fight is on.

In other words, you're trying to cover up the yellow fever with cosmetics. You're really trying to cover up the fact that the sin is still inside you by trying to appear as a healthy person would or if you find yourself falling into antinomianism, you say, "I can't do anything about the bad temper, that's it. I am bad tempered, that's my character, I am human, that's it. I am a Christian but I am bad tempered and day-by-day I can confess that to Jesus, day after day after day for the next 40 years, whether I gain any victory or not, I can confess it to Jesus because I am saved by his blood and not by my freedom from bad temper".

Loved ones, if you fall into antinomianism, which is what that is, then be assured the disease is still alive inside you because here's the truth you see. You can confess bad temper for years, yes if you really do accept that God can actually destroy that in you. But if you confess the bad temper with the attitude, "Well, I can't do anything about it, that's it. I am going to live with it, burdened for the rest of my life", then that's antinomianism and it shows you that there's still a resistance to God's best for you.

Loved ones, during the coming Sundays and especially the early part of January and February, we'd begin in more and more detail with Romans 7 and with the law but maybe you would just begin to think of the law in a scriptural way and begin to ask God what your attitude to it is, is there any part of your life where you're antinomian? I think a lot of us got into it in the thought realm. We got into antinomianism there. We said, "Well, we can't control it, so we'll just do it, not that bad, we'll do it". I think a lot of us got into legalism because we didn't really feel love for other people but we thought, "Well, a Christian is one who smiles so I'd better smile", so we smile and we tried to fall into the pattern of the other people in the group. Well you see you fall into legalism and antinomianism when you haven't really allowed God to destroy the sickness inside and that's the only answer, that's the final solution.

Are you willing to let God destroy your desire to be god? Are you willing to stop being god and let

God be God of your life? Are you willing to stop ruling your life by yourself, that's really it? If you are, God will infuse the Holy Spirit into you and you'll be healthy from the inside out, really. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for such a beautiful and such an obvious solution. We confess to you that we've often wanted to take a lesser solution. We've often looked at your law and come under the burden of it. We have often misused it as the Jews did instead of using it as a mirror into which children of God look to see if there's any way in which they can better please their Father.

We thank you Father that the law is a dear friend to us. If we have allowed that sickness of resistance to your will and self-deification to be destroyed in Jesus, Father we want that destroyed and Lord, we want you to begin to show us how to come into that freedom and that liberty so that the law can be our dear friend and can describe our life rather than convict it. We commit ourselves to you individually so that you may bring this about for the sake of Jesus and for his glory. Amen.