

Bondage of Law or Freedom of Spirit?

Romans 7:6

Sermon Transcripts by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

When you started college, what would you say was the biggest strain? Would you say the exams or the financial burdens or was it the living situation that you were in? Would you not agree with me that probably the most general strain that all of us experience around that kind of 18, 19, 20-year-old time was the strain of trying to be what we weren't? Would that not be true?

You know how it works. You do a course on Shakespeare. Really, all it is is a very elementary introduction to 16th century drama and its effect on English society, with a brief look at Shakespeare's comedies and it isn't much more than that. But in an apartment some evening, in a great group of your friends or worse, if it's during the Christmas vacation and it's at home, somebody asks you what you think of A.C. Bradley's analysis of Shakespeare's tragic hero in Hamlet. And you have not read A.C. Bradley and you have not read Hamlet and you aren't really too clear on what a tragic hero is, and if you're really honest, you'd just say that, but you know the way it is when you're 17, 18, 19, 20, all your friends are around you and you've talked about the courses you're doing at college and so out you go on that limb, and it's miserable, the whole experience is just shattering as you try to be what you're not.

It ends up just a bundle of vague generalizations and you're trying to make the point that, of course, I know all about A.C. Bradley and Dover Wilson and anybody else who wrote about Shakespeare's tragedy. So it's just a heart-rending strain that you enter into. I think it's true loved ones that if we're really honest about it, throughout our campuses this coming week, there will be many moments like that for many-many of our friends, hopefully not for us but perhaps for a great many of us too.

There are those moments when you get into conversations and you really haven't enough information or knowledge to carry them on but you begin to indulge in vague generalization and recondite obscurities that try to cover up the fact that you actually know nothing about the subject at all, and you're almost straining to be what the others think you are. Actually what it ends up in, is what God described, if you like to look at it in Romans 12:2, it's a well known expression but it might be good to look at it to see where it is. Romans 12:2 "Do not be conformed to this world," and actually that's what we end up being.

We're so intent to impress everyone with the fact that we're really very avant-garde. That all the avant-garde people conform together and they line up at all the surrealistic arts exhibitions. All the rest of us who are determined to prove that we're actually very individualistic and are rebelling utterly against the society, we all conform because we all end up wearing the same wild beards and the same wild clothes. And those of us, who really want to impress others with the fact that we're spiritual giants when we're not, end up all reading the same books and using the same expressions.

So it comes about that instead of our individual lives being really very exciting and very fresh and very first hand, they begin to be a little old and a little worn and a little bit of a mimickery of somebody else and copying somebody else and pretending to be what somebody else is. And oh loved

ones, wouldn't it be really good to be able to be just ourselves?

If you don't know anything about A.C. Bradley, just say I've never read the man in my life and if you don't know anything about Hamlet, just say I've never read Hamlet. Wouldn't it be lovely to be what we are and stop trying to be what we're not? But you know that so many of us respond to that and we say, "Yeah, I'd like that," but deep down in our hearts we think, "Yeah, but if people saw me as I really am, they wouldn't respect me and they wouldn't love me and I wouldn't get anybody to pay any attention to me." And so we carry on in that old strain of trying to be what we're not.

Actually many of us do the same thing with regard to just ordinary moral laws. We read the law like the one in Matthew 6:19-21, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

We think, "Yeah, that's the way we should be." We know that, that's the way we should be, but we know too that we're not really like that, that our hearts are where our treasure is and our hearts are too often with the future financial career that we're going to have. Our hearts are too often with our life insurance policies. Our hearts are too often with the conviction deep down that if we don't scramble to the top of the peak somehow, we're going to go under. And so, even though we're not like this, we feel we should be like this and we end up trying to be what we're not.

We're actually people who are trying to pile up treasures on earth but we know we shouldn't be, so we try to be what we're not and it all ends up rather old and rather worn and rather self-conscious because we decide, "Well yes, so we should give so much to the United Fund and we should give so much to mission and we should give so much generously to our friends and take them out at times." And in order to prove to ourselves that we are really this kind of person, we end up trying to practice a spontaneous thing that isn't spontaneous, and we end up trying to be what we're not. Now loved ones, that's what Paul is talking about in this verse that we're studying this morning, maybe you'd look at it, Romans 7:6 and particularly that phrase that he uses there towards the end of it.

Romans 7:6, "But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit." Now it's that phrase 'the old written code' and some of the other translations are, the oldness of the letter, the old way of the law, and it's a bit like what we do with Bradley and Hamlet. In order to prove that we are what we're not, we end up being rather old and worn about it and we end up slaving away at the letter of the law. We're not really the kind of people who do the things that God's law describes, but we try to prove that we are, by mechanically doing it step by step by step.

Now of course it was not God's will for us to tackle it like that. What God really says to us is, "Look, respect me as your maker and trust me as your loving Father and my Holy Spirit will then bring about certain attitudes within you so that you'll find that you don't commit adultery, you'll find you don't steal, you'll find you don't bear false witness against your neighbor." The problem with us is we don't respect him as our maker. We don't trust him for every little detail as a loving Father and so we find that it is impossible to do the other things that he said, "To have no other gods but him, to make no graven image onto ourselves." It is impossible to do those things. We find that deep down we really feel that there is no power greater than ourselves who cares for every detail of our life.

Often we sit in the theater and we hear the teaching and we say, "Yeah, there is a God who looks after the main movements of history. There is a God who might even look after Campus Church. There is a God who might be concerned about what Brezhnev does or what Nixon does but there is no power greater than me that cares for every little detail of my life." And so loved ones, we really don't believe there is a maker, we really don't believe there is a loving Father that we can trust and so, we find ourselves impossibly trying to obey laws according to the old letter of the law.

So you know, Sunday comes along and we say, "Oh Sunday, remember that's a day to holy. What does that mean? Okay, does it mean I have no ice cream or could I have ice cream? No, well, could I...strawberry, maybe just vanilla, maybe.... or could I go out for a lunch?" And the whole thing just deteriorates into a miserable old letter of the law obedience. Loved ones, the problem is just this that we're trying to be what we're not, that we're actually living a self-made, self-sufficient people that are pretending to be people who respect our maker and trust him as a loving Father, who will provide and care for us completely. So we end up in this miserable strain, schizophrenic life that is filled with failures and defeats.

Now actually, it's all accentuated by the fact that we begin to see that there are certain penalties for disobeying this law. And you see for instance, that Elijah and Moses and the other prophets said that there would be penalties if you disobeyed these things. And maybe you'd like to look at just two of the penalties in Leviticus.

Leviticus 20:10, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." Or if you look at Leviticus 20:27, "A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them." And so we read that not only are we expected to obey these laws but if you don't obey them, there are certain penalties that follow. So, we end up with an extra fear behind us that makes us continue to pretend to be what we're not. Brothers and sisters, the truth is this that with these penalties that God has fixed to the laws, he is not attempting some petty hand-slapping of wayward little children for individual infractions of his law, he isn't.

What God is after with that old death penalty is the attitude inside us that is wrong. The attitude that is well of a self-made, self-sufficient person who is trying to pretend to be a very trusting, dependent, loving son of God. What God is after, by the death penalty, is not to punish us for individual infractions of his law but he is after that inner attitude in us that prevents us spontaneously obeying his law.

That's really why, for instance, he made that statement in Ezekiel 18:4, "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die." God is not interested in us continuing to pretend to be what we're not. He isn't interested in us continuing to be in our own heart, self-sufficient, self-made, self-ruling, self-protecting people who are pretending to be trusting, depending, and loving sons of his and daughters of his. He is interested in destroying what in us is independent of him. He is interested in destroying the attitude in us that will not actually trust him, the attitude in us that wants to be egotistical, the attitude in us that wants our own way but wants to pretend that we're giving him his way. God wants that attitude to die and that's really why the penalty of death is exacted upon all who disobey his law.

What God is after is to destroy what we are so that we can become what he intended us to be. Loved ones, that's it, the father doesn't want any more pretence about A.C. Bradley and Hamlet. He

doesn't want all that bluff and that strain that comes from pretending to be what you're not. He wants to change what we are inside so that he begins to spontaneously do what he wants.

That's why every great tragedy, like the flood, down through the centuries, was an illustration by God of what he was determined to do to our egotistical, carnal, self-sufficient, self-made natures, and that is what he in fact did you remember. That's why Paul says that our old self was crucified with Christ. All that self-made attitude that you have, all that bluffing attitude that you have, all that self-sufficient attitude that you have that is really what produces worry. We really worry because we think we are self-sufficient loved ones.

If you really didn't think you weren't self-sufficient, you wouldn't dream of worrying because you would say, "What, I am expected to not to be able to face everything. I am not self-sufficient." But it's because we think we're self-sufficient that we worry so much, and we worry about the exams and we worry about the future and about finance, and what God is after is the destruction of that self-sufficiently inside us. And what he did in Jesus 1900 years ago was in fact to destroy that and that's really what happened in Jesus.

So, do you see the situation you're in, this morning? If what God was really after with the death penalty, was not slapping your hand but was destroying the attitude in you that forced you to disobey him and made you pretend to be what you're not. Then do you see that God doesn't need to do anything else against you? If he has destroyed you in Jesus, as he says in his word, then he has now nothing against you this morning. Do you see loved ones; God is not after punishing you for every little infraction of his law, that's silly. That gets him nowhere. What he is after is the destruction of that attitude in you that is self-sufficient and self-made and self-ruling and self-deifying and self-glorifying, and that he says is what he destroyed in Jesus. Our old self was crucified with Christ.

Colossians 3:3 says it clearly loved ones, if you like to look at it in another verse, because I think a lot of us suffer fear that God is going to do something to us because we haven't really grasped the fact that as far as he is concerned, we have already been punished for any sin that we committed. We have already had that self-centered, self-deifying attitude destroyed.

It's Colossians 3:3, "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." Now loved ones, that's why every one of us in the theater this morning is discharged from the law, that's why we're discharged from the law. We're discharged from the penalty of the law because God has exacted that penalty in Jesus and every one of us here this morning are actually under that respite and that reprieve, that's why Paul says that in Romans 7:6 if you look at it.

Romans 7:6, "But now we are discharged from the law," we're discharged from that death penalty because what God was after was not slapping our hands or punishing us but dealing to the death with that attitude in us that made it unnatural to obey him. Now, who of us are discharged from the law? Well loved ones, it's stated plainly on the next clause. See the words "dead to that which held us captive," and the Greek is actually 'apothanatei' and it stands for the past participle and it means having died to that which held us captive. So the ones of us who are discharged from the law and who need fear no condemnations from our Father in heaven this morning are those of us who have died to that which held us captive.

Now, that which held us captive is not the law, you know that. It's not the law that held us captive, that which held us captive is stated in Romans 6:2, "By no means! How can we who died to

sin still live in it?" Some people I think say that you died to the law. Well, God never talks about a dying to the law, as if there'll come a time when the law will no longer be obligatory for us to obey. You can die and be freed from the penalty of the law but you can't die to the law. The law is eternal in God's heart, but you die to sin.

In other words, those of us who have come to the place where we're willing to die to that self-sufficient, self-ruling, self-made, self-willing, self-deifying, self-glorifying attitude inside, those of us who are willing to die to that as Jesus died to it; those of us are discharged from the law. Do you see that Jesus was willing to be seen for what he was and he was willing to face the consequences and so he had taken a position as an ordinary man and he did not therefore pretend to be a God who could call the angels and archangels to take him off the cross? He was prepared to be what he was. Even when people asked him tricky theological question like "Whose coin is this?" Even when people asked him about the Sabbath of "should your disciples work on the Sabbath" he was willing to be what he was.

Loved ones, if we are willing to stop pretending to be what we're not, to stop trying to be swingers if we're not swingers, to stop trying to be avant-garde if we're not avant-garde, to stop trying to be clever and intelligent if we're not clever and intelligent, to stop trying to be spiritual giants if we're just dwarfs, to stop trying to be what we're not. If you're really willing to die to all that self inside you that wants to glorify itself and to deify itself and you're really willing to let that be destroyed, God will send his Holy Spirit into you and you'll sense within you, a spontaneous, joyful desire to have no other gods before him, a desire not to commit adultery, a desire not to steal, a desire not to bear false witness against your neighbors.

You'll find that it's possible to obey and align yourself with the moral law without any strain or without any sense of failure. Because it's amazing God sends a new, fresh Spirit inside you so that it is what Paul says, you start obeying and serving not in the oldness of the letter, where it was a shuddering, grinding thing that you had to force yourself to obey God's law but where it's a beautiful, spontaneous, easy thing. It's the freshness of the Spirit.

In other words, you're at last free to be what you are. You don't need to pretend. Brothers and sisters, it is possible to be pure inside, honestly it is. It's really possible to be pure inside so that when you're sitting beside someone, you'd be content for your heart to be projected upon the big screen that we have down here at here at times and they could see every part of it. It is possible to come into that kind of hope.

It is possible to come to a place where you spontaneously do what your Creator wants you to do because you've come to the place where you've died to your own self-sufficiency and your own self-creation and your own self-deification and you're ready at last to treat him as your loving Father and as a dear person who looks after you. That's what Paul says, that we've now been discharged from the law because God worked the death penalty on us in Jesus and God doesn't punish us twice for the sin and so we've been discharged from the law.

Having died to the old self that has held us captive, we now serve not in the oldness of the letter but in the newness of the Spirit. Brothers and sisters, that's the Father's will for us so that you'd never be any longer pretending, no longer trying to be what you're not but you'd be able to be what you are and that's a place of contentment and peace.

So would you just think over the things that we shared and will you pray a little and ask God to

show you, if you really have been discharged from the law, and if you really have died to the thing that held you captive? It's so good to be free it really is so good to be free. Let's pray.