

Law Provokes Sin

Romans 7:8

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I remember being stopped in my tracks, the first time I heard one of the classic objections to evangelical Christianity. It's one you've heard yourselves. Why don't you leave the Hindus and the Mohammedans alone? You go to them, you preach your laws to them, and you bring them into all kinds of guilt, just so that you can assuage their guilt by getting them to seek Jesus as their Savior? Why don't you leave them alone? They are happy enough on their own. They have their religion and you have yours. And it was a little while before I saw that well, first of all, you had to share truth and reality with people just because it was truth and reality, whether it actually made them sad or glad, you had to share reality with them.

I saw that that made sense that it was not loving if you really believed that other people were not living as if the Father of Jesus was the Creator of the world then it was important if you really loved them that you would tell them that. Whether it first of all made them sad because of the laws that you shared with them or whether it made them eventually glad because of the Savior that you shared with them. I think that is true, dear ones. I agree with you that we all have to be very sure that what we are sharing is reality but if you're utterly convinced that the Creator of the world is like the Father of Jesus, then it's very important that you share that with people who do not live that way, because otherwise, they're living in misery and sadness and depression. That's the second answer I saw.

The more I read about the dear ones in other religions and spiritists and animists and people, who had no religion, the more I realized that that picture of the ignorant, happy savage was a myth. That you could say that they had many happinesses and they had some freedom from care that we in the western world did not have but if you examined their history carefully, you found that it was littered with the personal depression brought about by all kinds of social and marital customs that were hideous and had no relationship to the loving Father of the world. If you studied their histories, you found that their bodies were often stunted by all kinds of ridiculous self-torture practices. If you studied their histories, you saw that their psychological and spiritual lives were often under torture because they were always trying to placate demons instead of to take authority over them. And I began to see that you can glibly talk about the happy, primitive savage but ignorance is not bliss and in fact, they were suffering many of the disadvantages of living as if there was no God and yet the worst thing was they didn't realize that they were.

So they were really suffering all the agonies and the purposelessness and the moral impotence of living as if there's no God without really knowing what was wrong with them. In a sense they were like that group that we talked about a couple of Sundays ago, like the group that surrounded Egil Krugh, men who created such an atmosphere of paranoia that they began to do things that seemed utterly reasonable to them and they were so wrapped up and involved in their own world that they actually didn't realize that they were apart from the world of reality until they were shocked out of it.

So it seems it's the same with not only many people in the western world but many people in the pagan world or in the world of non-Christian religions. They're involved in all kinds of weird physical and psychological and spiritual practices. They suffer all kinds of impotence and all kinds

of purposelessness and yet they don't really know that they're doing it and loved ones it seems that that's really the point that the Father was making in this verse today.

Romans 7:8b, "Apart from the law sin lies dead." Unless people some time see a man like Jesus, living in the way that we were made to live, they will never sense that they themselves are not living like that. Unless you have some law, a law of a person's life or a law of actual ethical directions to compare your own life with, you will never be aware that there is a better way to go.

It's a bit like the whole emphasis that's laid on cancer detection today. Obviously there's strong feeling that if you detect cancer early enough, especially if women detect breast cancer early enough, you can actually prevent the thing destroying your body. Now, it's the same principle. You share the truth with people who do not think that way because if you don't, they'll never realize their own situation.

They're actually suffering all the effects of the disease of living as if there's no God in the world. They're actually living in the midst of disease with their Creator and they're suffering all the consequences of that without knowing why and without knowing that it's really happening. Seems to me that's why God says apart from the law, sin lies dead.

I think it's important to ask yourselves in what sense it lies dead. After all, if by sin, you mean the supernatural drive to live as if there's no God that fills us with a selfish, willful, independence of him and of each other. If that's what you mean by sin, if you mean it's that inner power that makes you selfish and independent of your neighbor and of God, if that lies dead then that's good. Then we don't, we oughtn't to have a law.

If you can get rid of laws and that powerful drive inside you to be selfish and independent of God and of each other lies dead, then we're laughing, that's good, then we should leave the pagans to themselves. But if, loved ones, you look at the verse, it doesn't really come out in the English but if you look at that, 8b, the word for 'sin' there is not 'Hay Hamartia', which you remember would be 'the sin' and would mean that 'power of sin', that inward drive inside us to be selfish and independent, but the word is just 'Hamartia' and it means simply 'outward sin'.

Apart from law, outward sin lies dead. The inward sin is still driving there. You're still anxious to be independent of God. You're still anxious to be selfish. You're still anxious to get your own way but outward sin lies dead. Acts and words lie dead. Now, in what sense lie dead? It's as if they don't exist. It's as if they don't exist or you don't see them as they really are. That's what it is.

Apart from law, the outward actions and words that actually express your independent rebellion against your Creator and your selfish independence of everybody else aren't clearly seen to be what they are. In other words, apart from law, lies our statements that are simply inoperative. You begin to call things by another name. Fornication becomes simply releasing your inner sexual tensions. Envy and jealousy become simply a legitimate expression of the competitive urge in all of us. In other words, apart from law, things that are sins lose their significance. They're explained away, in a way that suits us and satisfies us and justifies us. Apart from law, sins cease to be seen for what they are. In other words, they lose their significance.

What is their significance? Oh, the same as red spots are for measles, same significance. You tell something's wrong because of the red spots, as same as shortage of breath is for emphysema, same

significance. You tell the emphysema is there because of the symptom. The same as a dripping nose has for the cold or the flu. You tell by the dripping nose that something's not right inside. Outside actions lose their significance as symptoms of the inward disease, apart from law.

It takes law to come along and say, "Listen, if you're doing this or if you're like that, if you're like the other or if you're saying these things, then you inside have an inward disease. You have an inward rebellion and independence of God. You're living as if there's really no God." That's really what it means loved ones when you look at that, apart from law then the sin lies dead.

You may say, "Well, what's the importance of it?" Oh the same importance as an alcoholic ever coming to the conviction that there's something wrong with him. Why is a drunkard easier to deal with than an alcoholic? Because an alcoholic is stashing the stuff away, he is swigging it every hour but he will not admit that he has a problem and so it's the same situation.

Hindus, Mohammedans, pagans, ourselves, if we will not admit that there is something wrong inside, then we're almost past any kind of cure and so the law exists to bring that to our minds. In other words dear ones, we're really all in the same situation as Cain if you would look at it. Genesis 4:7 it's one of those early historical events you remember that the Bible records.

Genesis 4:7, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Old Cain was all depressed and despairing because God would not accept his sacrifice and God said, "Listen, sin is inside you couching at the door and it's there all the time and you actually have a very selfish independent attitude to me but you don't know it." Now loved ones, it's the same with us.

The law reveals to what extent sin is couching at our door. So in that sense, it's invaluable. Oh, one of the great dangers is that we will rationalize away our sins, our outward actions, and we'll justify them to the point where we don't see them as wrong at all and that's why the law exists. A fellow called Studdert Kennedy was a padre in the First World War and wrote poems I remember in English literature trying to defend him as a poet, it's a little difficult to do that, but it is just a point.

"When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged him on a tree. They drove great nails through hands and feet and made a Calvary. They crowned him with a crown of thorns, red were his wounds and deep, for those were crude and cruel days and human flesh was cheap. When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed him by. They never hurt a hair of him, they only let him die. For men had grown more tender and they would not give him pain, they only just passed down the street and left him in the rain. Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," and still at rain, the wintry rain that drenched him through and through. The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see and Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary."

So that's what it is. Apart from law, you can have an attitude of sin towards God and yet never know it and law is there to expose that. That's really the first function of law, to help us to see the symptoms and the acts and the words, for what they are. To see them as they really are. Second function loved ones is, in the rest of the verse that we're studying, second function of law is to get at the inward attitude of sin and expose it for what it is. To let us really see it for what it is, now that you find in Romans 7:8), if you look at it dear ones.

Romans 7:8a, "But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of

covetousness." Now sin there is 'Hay Hamartia', it's the power of sin. So Paul is saying, "But the power of sin, the selfish independent attitude towards God and towards my neighbors, finding opportunity in the commandment wrought in me all kinds of covetousness." And the second function of the law is to expose that inward sin for what it is.

See it is true that the majority of our friends who don't have too much to do with God are not very conscious that they're doing anything wrong, nor were we, you remember. I mean the majority of us lived ordinary kind of lives, we didn't commit great crimes, we didn't do anything very wrong but we just began to sense that our life was kind of vaguely purposeless and we sensed that a certain impotence in it. We kind of sensed as the years passed that there was just kind of something missing. There was something that we weren't really getting that we felt we should get in life. It was almost like a feeling of not being quite up to power physically. You didn't know what it was but it was just kind of there.

Loved ones, it's that attitude of sensing that you've missed something but not knowing what, that brings about most of the psychological problems in our society. I mean we kind of laugh at the psychological popular phrase, "the masculine menopause" but yet we do know that many men face that. Many men come to a time 40, 50, 55, and they begin to sense, "Well, what have I done? What have I achieved? I am here for some purpose," and loved ones isn't it strange, we all sense we're here for some purpose. But many of our brothers, they come to that age and they sense, "What have I done? I have gathered part of a home together, which the bank and I own. I have some children that are going to get married soon. What have I achieved?"

Really, it comes dear ones from that sense of missing, a vague sense of missing something. You don't know what it is really what it is a sin. You're living as if there's no God. You're living as if he isn't your Father. You're living as if he placed you here just by chance and had not a definite purpose for you but you somehow feel you're missing something but you can't identify it as that.

Dear ones, it's the same reason. It's the same reason why sisters will often feel the same thing. It's the same reason they'll often feel if they come to a certain time in their life and they haven't done certain things, they'll feel somehow they've missed it. How many sisters are under the terrible domination that unless they have children, they have not fulfilled themselves?

Really what it is, is a feeling "I seem to have missed something. Something that I should have been doing," and they immediately identify, "All right it's children." It's not that at all. It's the sense that every one of us had a purpose here when we came to the world but we somehow have not sensed it. Of course you know what the majority of us do.

We then decide, well, I don't know what it is, so we lay out our own plan for our lives and it's a plan based on self-gratification and on self-deification. So we lay out a whole life on that basis and we concentrate on getting the things that we need and getting the kind of houses we want. Then we have to justify all this so we begin to rationalize the way we live until we come to the point loved ones, where that little vague sense of missing something is almost utterly suppressed.

Now it is the job of the law to come in and provoke that into life until it comes out and is seen as the massive monster that it is and you see why that unless you identify it, unless you see that it is crouching at the door all the time, you'll never be able to let God do anything about it. That's the heart of it loved ones, that many of our dear friends in offices that we meet day-by-day, bless their hearts, they don't know what's wrong.

See you know, you're just mad preaching a whole lot at them, the dear souls, they don't know what's wrong but they do sense that they're in some way falling short of something. They sense a vague purposelessness in their lives. They sense that they should be achieving something and that is of course what the law is here to do to bring that out into the open and to show that it is not just as a vague missing of something but it is a downright, determined, self-will rebellion against your Creator.

Now the purpose of the law is to provoke that feeling inside you until it chose itself like that. Loved ones, one of the marks of us sophisticated sinners is, we so justify and so rationalize and so refine our rebellion against God that you just wouldn't recognize it as rebellion at all. That's why, oh there are some instances of it, let's look at the law that talks about tithing because I think that's one that some of us have entered into and I presume some of you are as I was for a long time just fighting the thing as a wild illogical practice. It's Malachi 3:10, and there are many statements of this law but this is just one of them.

Malachi 3:10 "Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of host, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." So bring full tithes. We read that law and the inward independence of God is there and the selfish rebellion against him is there but we refine it all.

We say, "Tithe, a tenth of what I give? Well, yeah but I can't just do it just at the moment. Now, when I get the 15th payment from now made on my stereo, then I shall be able to do it." Or "A tenth, well, that's okay when you get up into \$1000-1500 a month but I am eking along here on \$200-150. You can't expect me to tithe." Or we go to the other extreme and we express the inward rebellion against God in this way, "Well, he promises that the barns will overflow with the blessing he'll give and I have heard a lot of people say that when they tithe their earnings, then they didn't have anymore trouble with their bank account troubles. So okay, I'll tithe."

Now, that is no more obedience than the other's obedience. That is just shrewdness and you see in that sense loved ones, it's still an expression of that subtle, independence of God. It's, "Well, I'll obey him, and on the outside he'll think I am obeying him but actually I am getting a good deal," but that's what we do dear ones. We do that with the law all down the line, you see. We take it and we either rationalize our refusal to obey it, we rationalize it away until any thought of it being disobedient is just an anathema to us and we don't believe for one moment that we're disobeying. We just think now we're being common sensical, or we obey it but we obey it with the wrong motive and wrong attitude completely. So we're nothing but naked raw obedience exists, there is within us that independence of God.

Now loved ones really, God demands from us raw, naked obedience, not doing something that we think is very sensible or will maybe profit us in a long run, not on the other hand, evading the kind of issue and saying, "Well, we're not showing naked, raw disobedience here, we're just being sensible". God brings the law to us to expose that inward rebellion against him for what it is as rebellion, not as a shortcoming, not as a prudent attitude for us at our stage in life, but to reveal it as rebellion. Let's look at another one, there's Matthew 22:21, and it's a good one at this time of the year.

Matthew 22:21, "They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things

that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." So for years you know, we've been playing at back and forth with the deductions and the expenses and now we have a great argument because we can say the president does it and so we'll respond to this and we'll say, "Well, he went for every little deduction and he went for those old papers about which there's quite a bit of debate. So if he can do it then I'll do it." And we still say to ourselves, "Yeah, yeah, but we're rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but after all lots of people do this. They don't expect the law to be obeyed." And we rationalize and we justify in all kinds of ways to prove to ourselves that we are not really disobeying the law.

But loved ones, do you see the law is here to provoke our sin into such life that we'll see that at the end of the day, we're just guilty of raw, naked disobedience, but we will not see that without that law. We'll rationalize and we'll justify in all kinds of ways. Just let's look at one more, there's Mark 1:35.

Mark 1:35, "And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed." The law you see is stated not only in ethical commandments but in Jesus' example. And we face that and the inward independence of God and the desire to rule our own life and have our own way is all there but we refine it. "Well, I mean that was practical in those days. I mean they had to get up early in those days. They hadn't such good artificial light as we have. So probably Jesus got up early anyway. Now that's different. Now today especially with this thermostat situation, now you see we set our thermostat down at night. So when you try to get up and pray in the morning, you just can't do it or, my knees are soft, or they're weak, or they're arthritic, or in the morning my breath, oh. So really, I do a better job in the evening or in the afternoon or next week or three years hence, anytime but in the morning." And loved ones, you see what we're at.

We keep covering it over. We keep covering over the naked, raw disobedience that is in our heart and we keep making it look better than it is and justifying it and rationalizing it. Now the law is here to provoke that into such a monstrous life that we will not be able to ignore it. Brothers and sisters, really I share this with you from my own experience that my trouble was in seeing that I wasn't as bad, that I was worse when I really thought it was. That was my problem.

Loved ones, why we don't think we're really as bad as God says we are we try all kinds of ways out of our problem. We would kill ourselves to save ourselves, we would. I think there are brothers and sisters that get to such a point, they think they've seen themselves fall at the hour but they haven't. They've just seen a kind of mellowed rationalized version and they think, "Well, maybe we'll do it ourselves, somehow, we'll do it ourselves."

Loved ones, the key to entering fully into God is seeing the raw, naked disobedience that lies at the bottom of your heart and seeing it for what it is and seeing that nobody but nobody can do anything about it but God, destroying it in Jesus. Now that's the purpose of the law. That's why old Paul says the sin that was within me, took opportunity in the law and the word is, "aphorisme". It really means impetus, took impetus, was inflamed by the law, was impelled by the law and that's what happens loved ones.

God is so good. The old law corners you from this angle on prayer, corners you on this angle from the point of view of the income tax, corners you on this angle from the point of view of unclean thoughts, corners you on this angle from envy, corners you here from pride, corners you here from stealing, corners you here from lying until the whole valley is filled with sin, sin, sin and you say, "Yeah, you're right. Okay, I give up. Go on. I see it", but loved ones, that's a good place to

be.

Oh dear ones, if you would just see that. If you'd see that when a man or a woman comes to that place then they are really willing to stop trying to tame the inward rebellion themselves and they are willing to start dealing with the Holy Spirit and letting God put that whole thing to death in Jesus and really it's the secret dear ones. It's the secret.

I know a lot of us look back and we talk about the puritanical days you remember, in the east coast when those preachers preached hell and brimstone and I am with you that it is not good to share that but loved ones we need to see our sin for what it is, just naked raw disobedience against God, just a downright independence of him, which is partly the power that deceives us from seeing what it really is, that's it. Realizing also that that naked raw disobedience provides it's own kind of protector in the deceiving power of sin and so we need you know to allow that law, to shout from all around us until we see, "Yeah, we are sinners. We're just people who want to live our own life in our own way."

So loved ones, it's a good thing. It's a good way to come. So I do ask you to really deal openly and cleanly with God's law. If you say to me, "Brother, do you think it would ever drive us to despair?" It only drives you to the despair that is able to turn to Jesus. The only person that will go to even the length of killing themselves to get clear of this is the person who is determined not to surrender to God.

Any person who really sees themselves as they really are will know that there's no power under heaven or on the earth but the power of God through the Holy Spirit to deliver them and that's a good place to come to. So I just thank God my own life, when I saw, I believe myself anyway at that time as I really was and saw the evil and saw the uncleanness and I think it's good to see that.

Loved ones, the beauty is that God can do something with that once you recognize it. It's like the old cancer, once you recognize and discover it then there can be a surgical operation that can clean you and heal you, so it is with sin. So that's loved ones I think part of what God is trying to say to us in the verse that the sin within us, the power of sin within us, takes opportunity or is inflamed itself, provoked by the very law that is supposed to restrain it and apart from that law, that sin, outward sins and outward acts and words, lie dead. It's as if they didn't exist.

So it's the same with the pagans, same with the Hindus, same with Mohammedans but most of all, it's the same with ourselves. The law is here to stir that thing up within us until we see that no one can save us from it but God in Jesus with the crucifixion. Let us pray.

Dear Father, I trust you for my brothers and sisters that you will enable each one of us to see that while we're still trying to do it ourselves, even by suicide or if we're trying to do it ourselves by will power or if we're still depressed and despairing or we're still trying to enter into crucified life or we're still trying to die to self or we're still trying to be baptized with the Holy Spirit, we have not come far enough in seeing the depth of our own rebellion.

Father, trust you to help each one of us to see that it is not more faith we need, it's not more of an emotional experience we need, it's not tender or harder preaching that we need, it's simply we need to allow the law to expose our raw naked disobedience for what it is. Father we would trust you to do that with us. We want to be open, honest people. We want to be transparent people.

Father we want no more hypocrisy. No more covering over our failure to get up in the morning with all kinds of rationalizations. No more defending our fiddling on the income tax with all kinds of justification. Father, we want to be real and honest before you so that you can begin to do your work in us and remove the cancer of sin and make us dear trusting children who have a good loving Father who do not need to fiddle on their income tax, who do not need to get an extra few minutes in bed because they know their Father will give them all the strength that they need and all the money that they need.

Dear Father we trust you for it in an experience like this for each one of us during this week, for your glory. Amen.