

God's View of Law: Part 2

Romans 7:12b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Before Easter, you remember, we were talking about our view of the law of God. And we mentioned how far off base it is compared really with God's own view of his law. You remember, we mentioned how we always have a tendency to zero in on all of the negative things that are said about the law in the Bible. We have a tendency to emphasize those, and therefore a tendency to look at the law in rather a negative way ourselves.

I think most typical maybe of those verses would be the one in Romans 3:20, if you would look at it, dear ones. It has in it, just a tremendous truth that is real to us all but it's put in a negative way, and because of that, we all who have come into a close relationship to God, tend to look at the law in a negative way.

"For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law since through the law comes knowledge of sin." But, you know, we have a great habit of looking at the negative statement and saying, "That's right. No human being will be justified in his eyes by law, so that's what the law is. It's a kind of negative thing. It really can't do us any positive good."

Yet I think it's easy for all of us to see why we tend to put down the law. When you consider how many of us here in this theater have spent so many years of our lives, trying to gain the approval of some significant other authoritative figure that we respect, by the way we looked, or by how hard we studied, or by how much we tried to be good, or to satisfy their ideal for us, or by how long we prayed, or by how regularly we came to church.

It's easy to see, that we've all had it kind of up to there, with this salvation by work stuff, because we've all played that game, where we've made a little set of rules and regulations, and then we've kind of tried to feel justified or self-righteous according to how many of those rules and regulations we obeyed. So it's easy to see why we put down law, because we are the experts in turning everything that is joyful in life, and that is free and spontaneous, into a law or a set of regulations, or a set of principles that we have to start trying to live up to.

Yet loved ones, you know that that kind of attempt at salvation by works, never really brought any kind of sure sense of acceptance. I mean, you look good but there was somebody that always looked better than you did, or you got a good grade last quarter, but there was somebody who got a better grade this quarter, or you managed to draw attention to yourself by something you wore this time, but there was somebody else who managed to draw attention to themselves the next time. And even with God, even with trying to prove that you're good enough to be accepted by God; it never seemed to bring any sure sense of acceptance, all this trying salvation by works.

Indeed, all it does is create tremendous tension inside us. And you know that. You just create a great tension. We were always trying to live up to what they wanted. We were always trying to do what we felt God wanted us to do. And so we were always tense inside and uptight. That's why it was such a tremendous release when we realized suddenly, that God did accept us, and it was our imagination that he didn't accept us. And he did accept us and not because we were good, or not because we'd done all that he told us to do, but because he had put us into Jesus, and destroyed all

the evil that was in us in him, and he had nothing against us. He had no need to destroy anything more in us. And so he was the last one to want us to die. And suddenly we realized that because of the cosmic execution of all of us in Jesus, 1900 years ago, our Father accepted us completely.

But loved ones, it was the previous miserable experience of trying salvation by works, that has made many of us think of the law in a negative way. And so we've often made legalism -- that is, trying to obey your own little regulations by your own strength -- synonymous with the law of God. And we've just condemned the both together. Really what we've ended up doing is throwing out the baby with the bath water, because we've thrown out the bad attitude of legalism that we had, but we've thrown out our respect for the positive good qualities of the law.

And you remember that we had got that far, at least before Easter. And we had come to a verse in Romans where God stated positive things about his law. And we were beginning to look at that. And maybe you'd look at it so that we'd start on the same verse. It's Romans 7:12. And it just states out positive, healthy attitude to the law, encouraging us to regard it as a friend whom we enjoy rather than an enemy that we resent.

"So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, and just, and good." You remember we dealt with the first two clauses two weeks ago where we saw that God was saying the law is holy. And we saw that the word "holy" means that's whatever God is. Whenever you come up against something that God is, you call that holy. That's what "holy" means in the Hebrew and in the Greek. It's just another name for saying, "This is what God is like."

So really, what that verse says is, the law is what God is like. You remember we saw that in different ways two weeks ago. But here's one example of it, loved ones, if you'd look at it, Romans 12:16(b), the last half of the verse.

"But associate with the lowly." "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited." Now that's a law of God stated in just a form of an imperative. "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly." Now God's law always shows what God himself is like.

In other words, God doesn't tell you to do something that he isn't willing to do himself. If he tells you to be prepared to associate with lowly people, the people who aren't very important, whom nobody knows very much, who don't look tremendously good to other people, who don't, by any means, draw lots and lots of friends around them; if God tells you to be friendly and associate and be close to people like that, loved ones, do you see it means He is like that? Our Father is like that.

It counteracts the whole heresy that television tends to emphasize, because when you see old Johnny [Johnny Carson, American television host] there night after night after night with everybody looking at him, it suddenly gives you the feeling, "Oh that, it would be nice to be somebody like that!" And television tends, in a mass society, to emphasize the importance of the famous people. And God of course, is saying to us, "That's not what I am like, myself." And, loved ones, you can see it if you look at a statement in Matthew 10:29.

When God tells us to associate with the people who aren't maybe terribly famous or terribly important in other people's eyes, then it's because He himself does that. The law is the law of God's nature. It's like a scientific law. It tells how certain phenomena behave. So the law of God describes how God himself behaves. So every time you receive a law of God, you can say, "Oh God

himself must be like that." And here it is. This is what God is like.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny and not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will?" You know it's amazing, when you see those tiny little birds, who knows how many of them die? None of us do, but our dear Father knows when one of them keels over and hits the ground. And He knows about it. It's incredible. And he knows the littlest thing in the world. And he's aware of it. He knows what happens to us.

Now loved ones, that means he knows what happens to you. If God tells us not to associate just with haughty people but to associate with lowly people, unimportant people, people whom nobody else sees, it's because that's his nature. He does that. That's why the next line says that he has numbered; "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered" and so God's law shows us what God himself is like.

So dear ones, I think a lot of us sit here in this group this morning. And I think a lot of you think, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, well, I know what you say, yeah. But everybody is looking at you, and it's okay for you, and they're looking at you." But, loved ones, the Father -- you'd wish you weren't here if you were me -- but the Father knows you. He really knows you, loved ones. And he knows what you're feeling. And he knows what you're like. And he knows what your hopes are. And if he knows a little sparrow when it falls to the ground, you are of much more value than sparrows. And your Creator knows you intimately. And he understands you. Well, we said that last day.

Would you like to look, dear ones, at the next part of the verse in Romans 7:12? It just states another truth about the value of the law. The first clause is, "The law is holy". The second clause is, "And the commandment is holy", that is, the particular commandments. The law is the law as a whole. The commandment is the particular commandments. And the commandment is holy.

And, you remember, we talked about the fact that holiness and unholiness can't exist together. Holiness is the power of God that goes out to destroy anything that would destroy him. In other words, God's good and man's evil cannot co-exist. And they must destroy each other. And so, part of the work of the law is to do that.

You remember we shared last day how incredible is the force of that power of law through this whole national disaster and tragedy that is engulfing Richard Nixon [US president involved in Watergate scandal]. It has just been amazing to many of us who have followed the development closely how the power of God's law seems to have had almost a spiritual force in continually exposing guilt, restraining sin and vindicating justice at every turn, in the whole proceeding that we know as Watergate.

It's just amazing. It seems that the law of God has been there all along even when the experts in law, the lawyers, have been doing their best to ignore it. There seems to be a spiritual power in God's law that restrains sin continually. You remember that's what we said -- the law is holy because it restrains sin. It's continually working to hold sin within certain limits. Loved ones, it is amazing.

Maybe we don't all take this view this morning. Now, I think more of us are probably taking the same view than perhaps a year ago. But I think many of us feel that everything possible was done to keep the truth from us as a nation. And it seems that everything possible was done to keep us from knowing things as they really were. And it is incredible the way the power of God's law has been working in places that none of us knew about a year ago.

Can you understand why Butterfield [Alexander Butterfield, White House aide to Nixon] casually says, "Yeah, there's a tape system in the White House?" I can't understand it. That wasn't his job. Even ever since that event he has been seen not at all to have been doing it deliberately, but just by chance. And yet it seems, you know, that in that very action, God was determining that truth would come out. Oh, I think typical of it, maybe, is a comment that you probably read in Time magazine this past week. And the heading is ironic but I'll read the piece first.

"One of the continuing ironies of Watergate is that Richard Nixon has become increasingly entangled in the scandal largely through a needless and voluntary creation of his own, his secret system for recording nearly all of his official conversations. If his clandestine tape recorders had not been silently capturing his words and those of his most intimate aides, he probably would not now be in so imminent a danger of impeachment. If he is finally forced out of office, it may well be largely due to those telltale tapes."

I am with you, and I don't think we should judge. I don't think it's right in any way to judge anyone involved. But it is incredible that God somehow ensured that there was record there of what took place. I think that record has to still be examined, and therefore I am not sure that Time [magazine] is fair when they place Luke 19:22 at the head of the article and say, "Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee." But still... And loved ones we need -- I think we need to pray at this moment for one who is still our President. I think in love we need to pray for him, and pray that Jesus will be close to him and come through to him at this time.

But I do think we need to thank God, you see. Whether we're strong Republicans that just believe it's still a communist plot, or whether we're wild Democrats that felt it was wrong from the beginning, I think we need to see the fact that God has a power of law that is still fortunately, in our nation, ensuring the vindication of justice, and the restraint of sin. And that is good.

Normally that is done through the penal laws. And that's why, you remember, my suggesting you last day, that when you went through a stop light or you went over the 30 mile per hour speed limit, that was not the issue. It was that you were fighting against the whole restraining power of law that God has given us to keep the world back from chaos.

Could we go on a little further, dear ones, this morning? Would you look again at Romans 7:12? And you can see there, and it says, "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just." And the commandment is just, because it calls sin, sin. It points sin out when it's there. In that sense, the commandment is just. It does not overlook sin.

That's why I encourage you, those of you who are Christians, I encourage you not to ignore the benefit of the law. Don't always be trying to prove you never sin. Don't always be trying to prove that you never do anything wrong. Be open to the law pointing out sin in your life, because here's the truth loved ones: we are so brainwashed by a society that lives as if there's no God, and that lives as if the only one to take care of you is yourself, that there's a tendency for us to begin to live that way ourselves.

So we're always under that kind of pressure of deception. We're always being pressured to think, "If I don't look after myself, who will?" You know, even our dear moms and dads, as they encourage us to get that old degree -- there's often a little of that in it, "Look if you don't get a degree, if you don't take care of yourself, nobody else will in this world. It's a dog-eat-dog world." There's a

strong tendency for us to be brainwashed by that attitude and to slip into that kind of attitude in our own lives.

Now the purpose of the law, one of the purposes of the law, is to expose sin in our lives or that independence of God, or that tendency to believe that there is no loving Father, or that tendency to look after ourselves because nobody else will look after us. The law exposes that tendency in us. That's why it's so good.

You find that mentioned, you remember, in Romans 3:20 which, the negative part of the verse, we read at the beginning. Romans 3:20(b), "Since through the law comes knowledge of sin." So one of the purposes of God's law is to show up when we are unconsciously living under strain, because we're not really believing that there's a loving Father looking after us.

I remember how this came in my own life in regard to the future and career. I could show you it, loved ones, if you'd look at Ecclesiastes 3:22. "So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; who can bring him to see what will be after him?" And suddenly, it came home to me that I didn't do that. I had, at that time, a job that I didn't really feel was fulfilling me or was very satisfying. And so I didn't enjoy what I was doing day-by-day. My mind was filled with all the plans I had for the perfect future job that I was going to get into, that would fulfill me and satisfy me completely.

So I didn't enjoy day-by-day what I did. But I didn't realize it until I saw this verse, "...that really there's nothing better that a man can do than that he should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; and who can bring him to see what will be after him?" And I was always living for the future. Old C.S. Lewis says, "The great problem about Christians is not that they're just living in the past but that they live too much in the future. They're always living for when it's going to be beautiful and when it's going to be exactly right." And it was just a revelation to me to see that I was not trusting my Father to take care of my career. I was not trusting him to give me a job that would be his will for me. I was spending my days resenting the job that I had, and worrying about whether he would give me the right kind of job later on. Now loved ones, the purpose of law is to expose that kind of sin where it occurs.

Oh, it came to me in another way. And it might help some of you if I mention it. I found, running through my life, a perfectionism. "Would you do this job?" Well, I'd hold back from it because I felt I couldn't do it perfectly; or, "Would you attempt to help this person in this way?" Well, I'd hold back and wait for the time when I could do it perfectly. "Would you write a book?" "Well, no, I'll hold back from it, keep procrastinating and putting off, because I want to write the most perfect book in the whole world." Loved ones, do you not think a lot of us are caught in that, perfectionism? And we won't attempt anything. We won't sing up here; we won't play the guitar; we won't move out and help bake the cookies next Sunday evening; we won't do anything, because we want to do it perfectly when we do it.

Then I read a verse, dear ones. And maybe you'd like to look at it. Mark 14:8, Jesus is talking, you remember, about Mary – Mary Magdalene probably it is -- who anointed his feet with ointment. And of course, the people around rebuked him, even the disciples said, you remember, in verse 5, "'For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor.' And they reproached her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me.'"

And then Mark 14:8, "She has done what she could." Suddenly I saw that God wants us to do what we can, and that all the old perfectionism that was piling on top of me was really just a perverted version of "salvation by works". I wanted to do the thing perfectly, because I felt, "Yeah, yeah, that'll prove that I am really valuable and really better than most other people." And, loved ones, honestly, if you examine it, I really think that you'll find that's the reason for a lot of the perfectionism -- that you're trying to do something so perfectly and so much better than everybody else, that somehow God will look down and see how outstanding you are, and just won't be able to refuse you a place at his right side.

Loved ones, it's just salvation by works, dressed up in beautiful looking clothes. Do you see that what God wants us to do is, do what we can? You know the only result of that perfectionism is, the paralysis, you remember, that Joyce [James Joyce, 1882 – 1941, Irish novelist and poet] talks about, is one of the qualities, I think, of the Irish. They would sit at the railway station planning to go to America, planning to go to America. "Yeah, I am going next day, next week to America. Yeah, I am going next year to America." And, you remember, Joyce talks about it in "Ulysses," the putting off, putting off, putting off.

Loved ones, I honestly think it's that perfectionism that is just a contorted "salvation by works" syndrome that prevents you and I doing the things that God wants us to do. And really what he wants us to do is, do what we can. So that's just another example of how God's law brought home to me a way in which I was living apart and independent of the Father.

Just look to the very last verse, dear ones, and then we'll stop. Romans 7:12. And it's the last statement about the law. "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good." "The law is...good." And the reason the law is good is stated there in Galatians 3:21. And again, it's a verse that we have looked at in previous Sundays.

"Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not." The law is good, because it's a description of the supernatural life of the Holy Spirit in the trinity family. And so if you want to practice the law, the only way you can do it, is to experience the supernatural life of the trinity family. That is, to let the Holy Spirit work in your life. So the law is good because it's continually giving you commandments that you cannot obey in your own strength and so you have to run to the source of supernatural life in order to obey it.

So the law says love your neighbor as yourself. Well, you can't do it, because you're so busy trying to prove to yourself that you're better than your neighbor, and you're so busy trying to get your own life forward, that even if you set your will to love your neighbor, you can't produce love.

So the law is good, because it says to you, "Choose to love your neighbor. You can do that; you can't produce the love, but you can set your will to love them. You can decide in your own mind, 'I am going to stop hating them; stop criticizing; I am going to love them.' And then stop clenching your teeth, saying you're going to love them, and start receiving the life of the Holy Spirit from Me." And he will shed abroad the love of God in your heart.

So, loved ones, the law is good in that it is always directing you to something that is beyond your own natural strength. And so it drives you into the life of God.

Just one more example of it in regard to marriage and everything that goes with it. Matthew

6:19-20, "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."

Of course, the fact is that if you're going to obey that in regard to marriage -- that would otherwise bring you security, bring you guarantee of freedom from loneliness in your old age, guarantee you enough money to keep you alive as the years pass. If you're going to obey that about marriage, and not in fact marry in order to lay up treasures for yourself, but are going to marry only when God tells you to, then, do you see, loved ones, the only way you can do that is to absolutely depend on the life of his Holy Spirit to supply all your needs, including the right marriage partner, if he wants you to have one? So in a way, the only way to obey the law in regard to laying up treasures for yourself is to be absolutely dependent on the life of God providing what you'd otherwise get for yourselves.

And so it drives you to that life, you see, in Matthew 6:26. "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" And you're driven to depend on that life, in order to obey the law about storing up treasures for yourself.

So loved ones, the law is good, because it drives you to the life of God that alone can enable you to obey it. So will you just think of those things, whenever you begin to get that old negative connotation in your vocabulary about the law? Whenever you begin to resent it, would you remember that your Father says, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. I want you to love my law and to enjoy it as I enjoy it."

I'll pray that you will do that, because until you -- it makes all the difference to your life, honestly. When you start enjoying the law and having it as a friend, and receiving a good rap on the knuckles from it; and then going to God to live the kind of life that enables you to live above the law. I really do pray that you'll come to it, so that you won't resent it, but you'll enjoy it. Let's pray.