

The Power Of Sin

Romans 7:17

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I think most of us have read stories of people who worked for some kind of dictatorial tyrant: members of the mafia or maybe a spy who worked for some foreign agent. And while they did the job, it seemed to them that they were absolutely free agents. In other words, if the member of the mafia was in the numbers racket, then while he cooperated and while he actually wanted to do the things that his bosses told him to do, it seemed to him himself that he was free. He really felt, "I can do what I want," because of course, at that time he was doing what he wanted. Or if the spy was prepared to continue his espionage, and while he was prepared to continue it, it seemed to him that he was free not to continue it, if he wanted to. In other words, they seem to themselves to be absolutely free as long as they wanted to do the same thing as the dictatorial tyrant power wanted them to do.

But you know in the stories or in the movies what happens whenever they begin to want to do something else. The member of the mafia doesn't want any longer to continue in crime, or the double agent doesn't want to continue any longer in the service of the foreign power. And then they begin to try to struggle out from under that tyrant power. It's only then that they realize that that tyrant power has a grip on them and will not let go. And yet they don't realize that until they start trying to get free.

So while they agree with what the power wants to do, they aren't even aware that there is a power behind their kind of servitude at all. Their servitude seems to them, absolute freedom, until they start trying to get out from under it. Then they suddenly realize that there is an incredible power that has been in control of them all the time, even though they never realized it.

Now, that's what Paul is saying, is the situation with those of us who suddenly realize that we're living lives independently of God. It seems to us, while we're living those independent lives, that we're living them freely, because our consciences actually want to live independent of God. And it seems to us, "This is something that we're doing freely. We can stop doing it if we wanted to." But it's only when we start trying to break away from that independent life that we realize that isn't as simple as that -- that behind our independence of God, there is an incredible power that has been controlling us all along, even though we never realized.

Loved ones, that's what Paul is saying in this verse that we're studying so maybe you'd look at it. It's Romans 7:17. And I think the verse will be clear to you in the light of what we've just shared, "So then," at this point in my life when I am trying to break free, "it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me."

Now, in case someone is here just for the first time today, it's plain what Paul is talking about here, dear ones, if you look at Romans 7:15. That's the problem he is talking about. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." So what Paul is saying is, before he met Jesus, and before he realized that Jesus has died for him, and before he began to acknowledge the claims that Jesus' Father's laws had on his life, his conscience wanted to be independent of God. And so it was him that really did it. That's why he says, "It is no longer I that do it."

Before he ever met Jesus, it was him that did it. He wanted to carry out espionage for this foreign power. He wanted to be in the numbers racket for the mafia. He wanted to despise other people. He wanted to criticize other people. So at that time, it was him himself that did it. But now that he has realized that God's laws have a claim on his life, now that he has realized that Jesus actually died, because He loved him. And he's now struggling to get free of that, he realizes, "Look, it's not me that does it any longer. It's sin inside me that is doing it. It's a power inside me that I never realized was there."

I think that's our experience too. I mean, if you asked a dear agnostic or atheist, that has no respect for the bible, or for God, or for right or wrong at all, an amoral person -- if you asked him, "Are you free?" he would say, "Yeah, I am free. You miserable Christians, you are bound by all kinds of wretched rules. I am free. I can do what I want." And he feels he really is free. And it's only after he begins to acknowledge the claims that his Creator's will has on his life, and begins to try to struggle to live that way, that he realizes, "I never was free. There is some incredible power that has control of me and it's that that makes me disobey. It's no longer I, myself, that am disobeying, because I don't want to, in my conscience. I want to obey, but I simply cannot. And it's not me that's breaking these laws; it seems to be this power of sin inside me".

What's the empirical evidence for that power, for the existence of the power of sin? 'Carnal fits.' 'Carnal fits.' Yeah, very-very sophisticated, you know. We're very highly civilized, highly educated westerners, so our fits are very sophisticated and very restrained. But they are 'carnal fits,' yeah. There probably isn't one of us here who hasn't experienced the 'carnal fit.'

You know what we mean. Carnality is just living independent of God. It's just doing what you want to do, whatever he says. And a carnal fit is something that takes hold of you, and you just cannot control. And you can't do anything about it. A carnal fit is the evidence inside us, that there is a power that is greater than us that has hold of us, though we don't really realize it.

Now it's really important to face that, dear ones, in the light of the fact that we, so many of us are on the campus, and in a campus situation. And it's so easy for us to do our little diagrams. And it's so easy for us to say, "Oh carnal life? Oh yeah, yeah. I know what a carnal life is. Okay, so you have spirit, soul and body, and God actually intends that it should work that way that you should receive things from Him into your spirit and you should receive love from Him and it should go out through your spirit, soul and body."

"Now a carnal nature is one that is working the opposite way. It's trying to get love from the world and from all the people around it. It's trying to get satisfaction from the world and all the people around it. And as a result, it's drawing in all the time. It's a parasite that lives off the world, and off everybody else. Now I see this is a carnal nature [the diagram with arrows from outside in]. And this is, in fact, the spiritual nature [the diagram with arrows from god to our spirit, to our soul, to our body and out to the world] that we were meant to have."

And it's so easy for us to make the change seem almost a purely intellectual one: "So okay, I've been living my life independent of God. Now I have to stop living independent of God. I must stop taking in from other people and from the world and I must start giving out," And we can easily give ourselves the idea, "This is just a quiet, technical adjustment that we need to enter into."

And it's very important to see, loved ones, the tragedy of that setup is not the described

situation, but the power that makes it continue like that. There is a power of sin that makes our lives go like this [out to in] rather than like this [in to out]. So it's very important that we face squarely the situation that, changing from living a carnal life to living a spiritual life is not just a matter of deciding, "I am going to do right," or deciding, "Now I am going to start loving other people after loving God first."

Loved ones, you'll find yourself in the same position as the member of the mafia. Immediately you begin to try to disentangle yourself from that you begin to find there's a power inside you that creates carnal fits, that you are utterly amazed at.

In other words, in fact, many people have felt so badly about this power inside them that they've become convinced they were demon-possessed. They found this power so utterly overwhelming their ordinary will power that they felt, "I am demon possessed." You're not demon possessed. You're in the hands of this power of sin that really is the heart of all carnal living.

What is it like? Well, it's easier sometimes to look at it in other people. You remember old Hamlet? Old Hamlet, very mild-mannered, very scholarly individual in Shakespeare's play. Then you remember he becomes utterly obsessed with the need to avenge his father's death. And that's the one thing that fills his mind all the time. You remember on one occasion, one of the soliloquies runs, "'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out contagion to the world. Now could I drink hot blood and do such deeds as world would quake to look upon." And you know, looking at old Hamlet, you'd never have thought he'd have worked himself up into that frenzy. But loved ones, isn't that it? There's something that either we work ourselves up into, or something that works us up into a frenzy. And we can do nothing about it.

It's the same. You remember Othello thought that his best friend was seducing his wife. And you remember Othello became obsessed with that. All brightness went from his life. All joy went from his life. He dedicated every moment to finding out if this were true, and then to avenging himself.

But loved ones, what about you and me? Do you remember the last deep, black depression and despair that you were in? Do you remember how that blackness seems to come down over you and you just could not get out? And you tried Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah and all the other little gimmicks you know. And your best friends tried to help you, but that depression and that despair was upon you, and you could not get rid of it.

Remember the bitterness. Remember the last time that bitterness took hold of your heart. Remember how your mind went round and round in circles and you just couldn't escape. You just felt such bitterness for that person who had done this to you. And you tried several times to autosuggest yourself out of it, and you could not. And it seemed to be a power of bitterness that had control of you.

Remember criticism. Remember when you refused absolutely to accept your own shortcomings. And you refused completely to accept the failures and the shortcomings of your friends. And you got into that mood of criticism where you were criticizing everybody. Everybody was wrong and you could not get rid of it. You couldn't get asleep at night, because this thing was churning round in your mind.

You know, you and I could repeat those examples with sorrow, and with worry! Remember the last time you had a carnal fit of worry where you were convinced that if Rothschild [Mayer Amschel Rothschild, ancestor of the wealthy Rothschilds] himself came into your bank and gave you all his money, you

could not escape the financial despair that you were in. And you became more and more engrossed in the financial worry that you were in. Or you got into the same thing over a job, and you went down and down and down. And you could not break free!

Loved ones, it's the same with love. You get the thing churning around in your mind and you persuade yourself, "No, it's just spring time." But it's not just spring time. The thing goes on and on and on. And you cannot get rid of it. And it just drives you and drives you.

Loved ones, that's what I mean. Those are carnal fits. And dear ones, it's just silly not to recognize reality, that that is in fact, the power of sin.

That's what old Paul is talking about when he says, "It is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me." Really that's the power of sin. And it's that power that exercises itself on the basis of one great lie. The one great lie is the lie we believe, that our personalities ought to work like this. On the basis of that great lie, this power of sin exercises itself in our lives.

Now who originates the power of sin? Well, dear ones, you just have to accept the plain implications of Jesus words here, I think. So will you look at them with me? Luke 4:5-8, I just think you can't get away from this however much attached to the middle ages that may seem, or however antiquated it may seem. Jesus obviously believed this without any question.

"And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.' And Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."'"

If you look at Luke 22, you get the same obvious acknowledgment by Jesus that there is such a person. Luke 22:31, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." And Jesus obviously acknowledges that there is such a being as Satan. There is such a power of evil.

Then the last one is Second Thessalonians 2. It's a description of the chaos that will obtain near the end of the world. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10, "Let no one deceive you in any way; but that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exults himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you, I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed." And in the King James [version] you remember, he is called the man of sin, "Will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing at his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved."

I think there's no doubt that there is a supernatural being that has rebelled against God. And Jesus calls him Satan. And he exerts a supernatural power of independent rebellious life in our world. I

think it's him that we touch when we go into a carnal fit. It's him when we touch when we lose our temper. It's his power that we're experiencing at that moment.

I think there are some important facts, loved ones, about Satan that we ought to face. One of them there is in that 2 Thessalonians 2:6, "And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time." I think it's important to see that it's not a dualism in our world. It's not one powerful evil power fighting an equally powerful good power. No. The evil power is under the restraint of God.

God himself is even using the power of Satan in these days. He uses the power of Satan to show us our own limitations, to show us the alternative, if we decide not to accept. He can use the power of Satan but he himself does not exercise it. But he does use it, and he restrains it. If God let the power of Satan go, we would have absolute chaos at this very moment in our economic life. But it's God, through miracles like Colson, through miracles like the tapes, that holds back the incredible power that Satan has to bring absolute relativity to our whole lives. So it is important to see that his power is limited.

It is important too to see that Flip Wilson [Clerow Wilson, Jr. 1933 – 1998 American comedian and actor] is right in some sense, but only in some sense. So he is right, really. It is, "The devil did make me do it." It is the devil that makes you do things. Where he is wrong is, he implies that you have no control over that. Well, of course you have.

The spiritual principle is that no spiritual power and no supernatural power can do anything in a human being unless that human being agrees with his will. That's quite important, dear ones, because I think some of you get under supernatural powers at times. They can do nothing inside you -- even though you're not supernatural yourself -- they can do nothing inside you unless you agree to it. If you reject them with your wills, they can do nothing.

So in a way, Wilson is right. Yeah, the devil does make us do it, but only because we're willing to do it. So it's important to see that it's the power inside.

Maybe it's good to see too in John 8:44 what the power is, because I think a lot of us overestimate Satan's power. "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Now Satan's only power is deception. He doesn't have an independent power of his own. I think that's important to see.

He does not have an independent power of his own. The only power in the universe is that of God. Satan's only power is to pervert that power, to misuse it -- just the same way as we could use nuclear energy to produce heat and light or we can use it to destroy. So that's Satan's power. He has power to pervert the latent power in the universe and the powers that God has given us.

And that is his power in our lives, dear ones. The reason he can send you into carnal fits is because he has deceived us utterly about the way our personality should work. It's his lie about love, in the lives of millions and millions of men and women, that has filled the world with, what appears to be, a power of lust. So by his deception, he can create a force that seems to be an actual power. But he does it initially through deception.

In other words, you remember we shared this before, that it is God's will that we should love him with all our hearts, and we should really enjoy our Father and enjoy loving Him as a dear and kind Father. And, as a result of that, of course, he would give us the life of his own Holy Spirit. And that Holy Spirit would move out through our souls and our bodies, and would begin to appreciate other people the same way as God does, and would begin to show the same outgoing interest in them as God does. So that's the Father's plan, that his love should come into our spirits, should go throughout our souls and bodies, and we should, every time we see each other, really just appreciate each other.

So that the fellows would see the girls, and would just appreciate them, just thank God for such dear people, just thank God for the Spirit of Jesus that he sees in his dear sisters; that the sisters would see the fellows, and would just thank God for them, and would love them with all their heart, and love them freely and openly and with purity. That's God's plan.

And of course Satan has convinced us, "No. Reject God. You don't need God's love. Live independent of him." So there has developed, inside our spirits, a tremendous vacuum. And we feel the only way we can fill it is to get love. 'What we need is love.' And you know loved ones, that's the whole theory today. 'All we need is love.'

The killer is, we all need love. You know, we all want love. So we're all trying to get love from each other. So there's an absolute dearth of love, and an absolute surplus of people wanting love.

But Satan persuades us, "Yeah, you have to get love, you have to get love." So we begin to look to our friends and to try to get from them the approval that only God can give us, to get love from them, to look to our wives and our girl friends, and to try to get the stimulation for our bodies, and the satisfaction for our emotions that should have come from God himself.

Now, it's because Satan lies to us, that that's the way our personality should work, that his power is then released. But loved ones, his power can only be released in a carnal nature. His power can only be released in a person who believes this carnal lie, that your personality should work that way, that you should get from the world and from people, all you need.

Once a person rejects that lie, the power of Satan's sin can no longer exercise itself in that person's life. But you do see that what we need is not simply to recognize the right and do it, but to believe the right and then to trust the supernatural power of God to deliver us from that power of Satan. But it does take that supernatural power.

You'll see dear ones, a little more precisely what Romans 6:6 means, if you look at it there. "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." And what Satan of course has deceived us into doing is taking each one of those three factors, and trying every one but the right one. So we say, "Ah, the trouble is with the sinful body. That's the problem. The reason I have trouble with sexual desires, the reason I have trouble with gluttony, the reason I have trouble with pride, is my sinful body." So the Monastics, you remember, set out to annihilate the body. And they set out to try to destroy it. And we have a great deal of Monasticism still residing in even our Protestant Christendom. We still tend to believe, "Ah, the body is the wrong thing; the body is the wrong thing." And the body isn't. The body is just the instrument for something else.

Many of us have looked to another factor in that Romans 6:6. You see that, "We might no longer be

enslaved to sin." And we said, "That's it. If we could remove the power of sin from the world, then we'd be okay." And many of us have thought, "Yeah, you can remove the power of sin." Loved ones, you cannot. Satan is going to continue, by God's will, until the end of the world, when Jesus is going to destroy him. You cannot remove the power of sin from the world.

Nor can you remove yourself from the power of sin. And many people have tried to do that by gathering themselves into Monastic communities.

You see, there is one power that links this with this [shows diagram of 3 concentric rectangles as the personality, with the center being the spirit, the next being the soul containing the mind, emotions and will, the outer rectangle being the body and outside that being the world and shows arrows from the world in through the body to the soul--indicating our depending on the world for things]. The one power, the one factor that links the power of sin with the sinful body, and therefore with the world, is the middleman in the whole operation. And that is the old self [depending on the world].

What God has done is to destroy that. In other words loved ones, without that old self working like that [shows from outside in], the power of sin cannot express itself in the world at all. Nor can it express itself in you. And you can be delivered from that power of sin the moment you're willing to let God do that [shows a cross through that whole backward personality] and replace it with this [shows a new drawing with arrows from God to our spirit and out through the soul, through the body and out to the world], replace it with that kind of personality.

So it's really the old issue again. Are you prepared to live that kind of a life? Are you prepared to stop being one great sponge that just sucks up, all the love from everybody else, and all the attention from everybody else, and all the approval and the recognition from everybody else? Are you prepared to stop being that? In fact, are you prepared to be squeezed absolutely dry like Jesus, and to be without anything from anybody else, but only what God himself gives you?

Are you prepared to be crucified with Christ? That's really it -- where his mom is standing at the foot of the cross, but he can no longer get the satisfaction of his mother's love. Where his friends deserted him, and he can no longer depend on his friends. Where he is hanging on that cross and he no longer has a future to give him comfort and exhilaration in thinking about it and anticipating it. Where he is nailed to the cross, so he can no longer do even what he wants to do. He can't move his hands even if he wants to.

Are you prepared to come into that kind of crucifixion so that God can raise you into this kind of resurrection [shows diagram of life working the right way -- receiving from God in our spirit and giving out through our soul and body to the world]? Because that's the only way, really, to be delivered from that power of sin.

You know fine well when you're in a carnal fit, you say, "Oh, I would do anything to get free of this." But after it's over, then you begin to wonder, "Well, would I do anything?" And it does mean, you see, that you have to die to some of the other things that you enjoy.

You remember, I mentioned some of the carnal fits that we like: the self-pity -- we quite like that. It's quite nice to cry yourself to sleep at night and think how miserably everybody treats you, and what a worthy martyr you really are, deep down. And all of us have little things, you see, that we're not really prepared to let go.

Those are the things that God is bearing in on you about. And that's it, loved ones. And the moment you do, there's just a deliverance from the old self and deliverance from the power of sin that is supernatural. Thank God. Let us pray.