

The Pretensions of the Carnal Will

Romans 7:18

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

For several months now, we have been talking about the central problem of everyone's personal life. It's the problem of moral impotence. It's most clearly encapsulated in that verse Romans 7:15, if you would like to look at it. That's where we'll spend our half hour -- in that chapter.

Romans 7:15, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Dostoyevsky called it that "streak of moral perversity" in mankind. Others have called it the "Mr. Hyde underneath our respectable religious Dr. Jekyll." But we all know fine well what it is. It's that thing inside us that makes us do what we know we shouldn't do and drives us to distraction, to defeat and to despair.

What we have been discovering over the past months is that most of us deal with the problem on far too narrow, and yet in a way far too broad a base. We are far too narrow in the sense that we think the problem is much smaller than it really is. But we are too broad in that we are far too general about our attempts at the solution.

Most of us think what we ought to do is try to deal with each of our moral failings, one-by-one, piecemeal. We ought to take the irritability and concentrate on it for a while. Then we ought to take the uncleanness and concentrate on it. What we have all found is that the moment we begin concentrating on some other attitude than the one we were on, the miserable old dragon that we were trying to suppress before raises its ugly head and we're back where we started.

So we found that when we tried to deal with these moral failings, piecemeal, one-by-one, we discovered that there was something deeper underneath them that we needed to deal with. It's something that keeps them coming up almost like the hydrous head -- that monster that was met in that classical myth where he would cut off one head and two would grow in its place, cut off those two heads and four would grow in its place, cut off those four heads and eight would grow. And so it went on.

Every time you manage to slice away the impatience or slice away the bad temper, more things seem to come up in your life than were there before. Most of us have found we've been making that mistake. So we've given up self-denial for Lent and we've tried to practice generosity at Christmas time. Then, when those seasons were over, we've found we were as mean and miserly as we ever were before. We were as undisciplined as we always used to be.

So we have found that the piecemeal approach is really not satisfactory. What we have seen is that God our Creator -- through Paul the apostle -- has shown us that the problem is much broader than that. The problem is not the individual failings. The problem is inside us ourselves. Our whole personalities have been turned back to front.

That's really what Paul has been telling us. Our whole personality has been reversed. We were meant to operate in one way but for years we have been operating the other and therefore we cannot possibly live the kind of life that the Creator has made us to live. It's a bit like running a car on methane gas when it hasn't been adjusted to methane gas. You're never going to get the

performance out of it that you'd get out of premium gas. It's a little like that.

It's a little like a car made to operate on the internal combustion engine and instead you get two old horses and tie them to the front of it. You're never going to get much more than four miles an hour out of it. It's operating the wrong way. Now it's the same with our personalities.

The reason that we have these defeats is to be found in the fact that our whole personality has been reversed. We've been turned around back to front and that's what needs to be turned around the right way. In fact we do what we do because we are what we are. That's what Paul says. He says it there in Romans 7:14, if you'd like to look at it.

Rom 7:14, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin."

What we've been seeing is that we lose our temper, we have trouble with unclean thoughts and we have trouble with self-glorifying motive life because we are carnal. Carnal means our personality has been turned around the wrong way. It's been reversed. The whole operation of our personality is back to front.

You can see that in regard to the will. Those of you who come Sunday after Sunday, please be patient with me. There are ones who are here for the first time and we should love them enough to help them to see what we're discussing. You remember that in First Thessalonians 5:23, God outlines the personality to us.

First Thessalonians 5:23, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." We have seen that there is a spirit, soul and body level in our personalities. It's not that they are necessarily entities that can be philosophically defined, but we do know that we exist at three different levels of our personality. Implicitly in the rest of the Old Testament, God has outlined to us the parts of the spirit. We have an ability to commune with Him, an ability to know what He wants us to do, and we have an ability to examine whether we're doing that or not.

Then in our souls we have the psychological part of us. We have our wills and our minds and our emotions. Then the body expresses all of that to the world. What we have seen is that it was God's will that we should receive the Holy Spirit and the life of the Holy Spirit from God through communion in our spirits. That life or relationship that we received would have the same effect on our lives as a fully satisfying love relationship.

You know that many of us who have found ourselves in love have discovered that we haven't such a tremendous need for food as we used to have. And we haven't such a tremendous need for a lot of other exciting things. In fact, many of our moms and dads are amazed that we're prepared just to sit with some girl or sit with some fellow and just look at them. We who wanted all the motorbikes and all the boats and the cars to keep us happy have discovered that when you are receiving satisfaction deep-deep down in your being, through the recognition and the acceptance of some other human being who knows you utterly, then you discover that you don't have need for a lot of the other substitutes that you have been using for years.

Now that was God's plan. We would receive through our relationship with Him all the emotional and intellectual satisfaction that we needed. We would be utterly satisfied with our lot and our relationship with the Father. Then, it was God's will that through the intuition of our spirits, He would intimate to us what He wanted us to do in the world. We would in turn, pass that through our

conscience, which would (because of its close relationship with our wills) then examine whether we were using our minds and emotions to express that will of God (and the direction and power of God that we received through intuition) out through our bodies to the world. That was the Father's plan for us. That was His will.

In that way we would have been used by God to express His direction and power to His world. We would presumably have been shown by Him that we should take the garbage (that we dump on the outside borders of every city) and use it to heat our cities. We would have received through God intimation and guidance that we should use our sewage (the tremendous tons of nitrogen in our sewage) and use it to fertilize our crops.

Presumably He would have shown us that we ought to use the wind and the solar energy in our world to produce the energy that we needed for our industries. We would also have realized that we should use this enjoyable life that we experience with God -- the precious 70 years that we ourselves have -- to transmit that power and direction of God to the rest of mankind. That was God's plan for our personalities.

Now what we have seen is, we refused that absolutely. We refused this relationship with God and we said to ourselves virtually, "We can do without this Holy Spirit whatever He is, this uncreated life of God. We can make do with the psychological life and the physical life that we have." And so in fact we simply refused this relationship with our Father in heaven.

As a result, our spirits became sleepy and eventually died. They were able to give no direction and no power to the rest of our personalities. Worse than that, we lacked the acceptance and the protection that we had before experienced from our Father.

You know that protection. He says, "Look at the lilies of the field. They toil not neither do they reap." You never see a lily sweating. You never see a lily worried. You can't think of a flower getting worried or getting depressed. That was God's will for us: to have such a close relationship with Him that we would experience not only His approval in our lives but we would experience His protection. We lacked both of those.

So we began to use our mind to manipulate the world and other people so that we could get from them (through our minds) the recognition that we really needed from our Father. Many of us are involved in not doing our jobs. We're not doing our jobs. We're trying to gain somebody's approval. We're not enjoying being an artist. We're not enjoying being a teacher. We're not enjoying being a salesman. Many of us are just involved in getting other people's approval and recognition because we really lack it from God Himself.

We began to use the world and people to begin to experience some of the protection that we lacked from our Father. We began to use the world to produce this protection for us. In reality you can see what happened. The will ceased absolutely to be the executive of our psychological personalities. The will became the servant. It became dominated by our minds and emotions, which were in turn dominated by the outside world and the fulfillment of our own needs.

Far then from using our will and mind and emotions to express God's direction and power to the world (to fill the world with His beauty and His life), we began to use our mind, emotions and our will to meet our own needs. We began to act on the expediency of our own needs for protection and approval rather than the principle of God's direction and power to the universe.

So the will became a slave, which wasn't God's plan at all. God's plan was that the will would be the executive. The will would determine what our minds thought. The will would determine what our feelings felt. The will would determine what our bodies did. But now our wills became utterly submerged. Instead of being the executive (guided by the conscience) that told us what God wanted us to do, the will became the manipulated servant. It became the slave of our minds and emotions and of every expedient situation in which we found ourselves.

So we didn't bother with which was the best way to heat the cities. We saw the coal, took it out of the ground and strafed the ground to get the coal. We could make bigger profits that way, protect and provide for ourselves and gain for ourselves some approval and recognition in government and business circles. So we went to it and tore the coal out of the ground.

We didn't bother about what was the best way to fertilize our crops. We decided the quickest way was to use the oil and fossil fuel derivatives. We've used them and now we're beginning to come to the end of those sources of fertilizers.

We didn't bother with the best way to get energy to empower our industries. We decided the oil is there. Let's get it out of the ground. It doesn't matter whom we take it from. It doesn't matter what mess we leave the third world in. We want it and so we began to suck everything into ourselves. The whole personality became an in-turned, introverted experience and operation. It is absolutely different from what God has intended.

We decided rather than go to the third world and share the life and the direction and power of God with them, we would empty the third world for what we needed. Now that's part of what we mean by saying that we are carnal. That's part of what Paul means in the verse that we're studying today, Romans 7:18a.

Romans 7:18, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh."
Just take the word "flesh" first. He isn't saying nothing good dwells in my body. That misunderstanding has led to all the asceticism of the monasteries and the puritanical disrespect for our bodies. He is saying there is no good in me, in my flesh; that is in my "sarx".

"Sarx" is the Greek for flesh. It means not just the body but it means there is no good in my body-dominated life. There is no good in this carnal, independent life that I now live. There is no good in this body dominated and physical dominated will (using physical in the large sense of the mind and emotions). He is saying there is no good in that.

In other words, "sarx" in the New Testament is not body. It is body dominated, physical dominated, and psychological dominated personality. Of course you know the level we've come to. We're always told in educational circles, "What do you need? What will fulfill your personality?" The thing has turned full circle because we're now encouraged to look for a job -- not that will give the direction and power of God to the universe -- but that will fulfill us. And so we have institutionalized carnality and made it respectable. That is what Paul is saying; there is no good in that part of me.

So don't rebel against Paul and say, "Oh there's no good in my body? It's quite a good body. It does lots of good things." He is not saying your body. He is saying there is nothing good in that physical, psychological dominated personality, there's nothing good in that. You may say, "Nothing

good? What do you mean by good?" Well loved ones, you'll find it in Luke 18:19. It gives us what the Bible means when it talks about good.

Luke 18:18-19, "And a ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.' Now that points to the truth that is found even in the etymology of the word "good". In Anglo-Saxon the word "good" is simply a long "o" as opposed to a short "o" in God. It's very obvious that good, in the roots of our language, was tied to God.

In other words, when you say a thing is good (in Jesus' sense of the word or in the scriptural sense of the word) you mean it's good because it's according to God's will, done by His power and for His glory. Now that's what Paul is saying. Paul is saying, we're carnal people. There's nothing God directed and God empowered (for God's glory) in our physical and psychologically dominated personalities. That's really what he is saying.

Of course some of us say, "Oh no, that's not right. I may not have allowed myself to be crucified with Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit, but my will does will many good things." Paul agrees with that if you look back to the verse we're studying in Romans 7.

Romans 7:18b, "I can will what is right." I think many of us are naïve about this. We think this personal power of evil, Satan, has got our personalities going the wrong way and he's going to make us all monsters. He's not. He is no fool. He knows if we all became monsters we'd know there was something wrong.

In actual fact what he does is get his way as much as possible and make us treat ourselves as God who have to suck energy, approval and recognition from everybody else in the world. But, from time to time, he allows our will to will what is right and good.

All of us feel like giving something to The United Fund from time to time and we feel like doing many more good things than that. So what Paul is saying is that you will often find yourself willing what is good but you're in the same position as you always were in. You can will what is right but you cannot do it.

You can will to do something good according to God's will, by God's power and for God's glory, but you cut off God there in your life. You cut Him off here. It is impossible to do anything for God's glory unless it is through God's power flowing through you. If you say to me, "You mean moral goodness is not what we're aiming at?" That's right.

There are many morally good men. The Huxleys were morally good men. Bertrand Russell was a morally good man. There is much moral goodness in the world. But there is no true goodness in the sense of something done according to God's will by God's power and for God's glory unless it is done through a personality that is operating the right way.

Do you see where God gets His glory? He gets His glory from the power of His life flowing through the communion of our spirits in the intuition, through our consciences and our wills and our minds and emotions and out into the world. Then God can say, "I did that." They started to use their sewage for fertilizing because of My life going through their personalities.

In other words, it's possible for many of us to use the sewage for fertilizing and have nothing to

do with God at all. In that case it just brings glory to our own brilliance. But God's will is that His life would come through us like that. I think we need to be really aware that that's moral goodness (or carnal goodness) where you can will what is good but you cannot do it.

You can will a thing for God's glory but you cannot bring it to God's glory unless the Spirit pouring through your personality does it. That whole practice of carnal goodness started in Genesis 3:5 and is stated there.

Many of us are foolish. We think that Satan is all "Rosemary's Baby" [a film] and that kind of stuff but he isn't at all. He likes to do lots of good things -- as long as it's not by the power of God flowing through a personality. He knows what God is after is personalities that operate in his way that will be utterly at home with Him.

Satan knows that. Satan knows that it isn't the results the count. It's the personality. God is more concerned with what you and I are than with what we're bringing about in His world. If we are what He wants us to be, we'll bring about His will.

It's in Genesis 3:5. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Satan right there was saying, "Look, you're going to be like God, you're going to be doing God's will. God made you in His image. He wants you to be like Him. Now that's exactly what you're going to do." Adam and Eve were probably willing what they believed was God's will. Many of us find we can do that. We can will what is right but to do it requires the Holy Spirit of God pouring through our personalities in that way.

You can see a lot of this carnal goodness if you look at it in some of Jesus' comments on the Pharisees. It's in Matthew 12:33-34 where Jesus laid emphasis on the being rather than the doing. He saw more clearly than we do how you can often will the right thing but you cannot do it. That's because you are not basically a God-directed and God-empowered person.

Matthew 12:33-34, "Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." So He is saying you're pretending to be good. But you know yourself; your life is not dominated by the power of God's Spirit.

Or look at Matthew 23. The carnal will loves religion. I think a lot of us feel that, "the proof that I am in the right position with the Holy Spirit is that I come to church every Sunday." The carnal will loves to do that and Satan really enjoys a bit of religion. He knows, "It doesn't do anybody any harm and usually does them a lot of good." (From C.S. Lewis's "Screwtape Letters" point of view.)

Matthew 23:25-26, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! First cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean." Jesus is pointing out they are only outside loving religion. Matthew 23:27, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."

I think it's important to see that the carnal will loves philanthropy and supernatural activity. There are a lot of us led astray by this. We keep thinking, "Oh well, if my will is willing what is

good, then I must be okay." No, the carnal will will often will what is good but is not able to do it.

Matthew 7:22, "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'" Now, why did He say that to them? They were casting out demons in His name. It's because Jesus knew they weren't doing it by His power but by the supernatural power of the elemental spirits of the universe.

So it is possible often to will the right thing and even to appear to do the good thing. But unless it is because your will is a slave of your conscience, it will never redound to God's glory. That's the heart of it. Is your will the unquestioned slave of your conscience? Or when you do good things, is it not so much because God's Holy Spirit has poured through your conscience and has told you to do them, as it is the individual devising of your mind and emotions to do something good deliberately on your own and by your own power? That's the issue.

The issue is not are you doing lots of good things. I bet that all of you are doing many good things. I'm sure all of us are involved in doing many good things. But are you doing it because of obedience and unquestioning slavery to your conscience? Or, is it because your will is dominated by your mind and emotions and they have determined that this is a circumspect or prudent thing to do at this time?

There's just a complete difference. One way, it's an in-turned thing to build yourself up and provide yourself with the protection and the approval that you lack from God. The other way is a way of sharing the direction and power of God's life with the world. That explains partly why you've seen results from some good things that you've done but seen absolute defeat and failure in other good things that you've done. There is a difference by the power.

What I'd ask you is not, "Do you come to church every Sunday, and do you try to be kind to your neighbor?" I'd ask you is your will the unquestioning slave of your conscience? Are there things that your conscience has told you (received in the intuition of your spirit) that you have broken? You've broken that connection and no longer is your will the slave of your conscience. Your conscience tells you to do something and you discuss it with your mind and emotions to see if it's a circumspect and prudent thing to do.

Now loved ones, there is a way of freedom and it's really where your will is the absolute slave of your conscience. Would you be prepared to take a stand today and even determine that? That's what it means to be crucified with Christ. It means to stop having the right to let your will be guided by the outside and to commit yourself to your will being guided only by your conscience -- in every little detail. It makes all the difference. Let's pray.

Dear Father, we know the light and life that will flow into our homes and job situations if we were to take this step. Father we know that we helped to bring the murkiness to the office. We helped to bring the grayness to our colleagues' moral opinions, because we hold back so often ourselves Lord. So often we've known that You were giving us direction through the intuition of our spirit.

We've known we should make a move. We've known we should let that Spirit of spontaneity flow through from you to those with whom we work. But we've held back and questioned the thing in our minds and discussed it as to whether it would be a prudent thing to do. All the freshness, vitality and

vibrancy of your Holy Spirit have drained from the original command. It's ended up a disappointing expedient action on our behalf. Father we know you could transform our offices. You could transform our homes. You could transform our classes at school if we would take this step of putting our wills unquestioningly under the executive of our conscience.

Father I would trust you to deal with each of my brothers and sisters and deal with me. Enable us to see that being crucified with Christ involves doing that and letting God take care of the consequences. I trust You Lord Jesus to baptize with the Holy Spirit any brother or sister who is willing to take this step of allowing You to come in as the executive of their lives and not as their servant. I pray this for your glory. Amen.