

The Necessity of Suffering

Romans 8:17b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

More people go to church in American than any other country in the world. Have you ever wondered why so many go to church and yet there are relatively so few who really are Christians? Because I think that would be true, wouldn't it? There are much greater numbers that go to church than really live like Jesus through the week. Now why is that? Why would so many of us, in our home churches, have noted many people who seem to admire the Christian way and who really seem to be all for it but didn't live it during the week? Or why is that thousands and thousands of people respond to God in an evangelistic campaign, or in a tremendous reaction like the Jesus movement, but a year later they are purely nominal Christians? Now why is it that that takes place?

I think, loved ones, the answer is there in Romans 8:17, and especially the last half of it, "And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ," and then the second half, "provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." I think that's the reason why so many people respond initially to the proclamation of reality in Jesus and then a little later you find they have no interest in it at all. I think it's because of this business of suffering that is built into Jesus' call to us. I mean it is a fact of fallen human nature, isn't it, that we always respond to the brightest and best and want it with all our hearts until we find we have to pay for it.

We really do, we want to go after a thing, we like what's good and we want it for ourselves until we find there is a cost to be paid in order to have it. So I think all of us who have ever played tennis would love to be like Jimmy Connors but just the thought of eight hours a day on those old tennis courts discourages us. And we like the idea of being like Jimmy Connors with that two handed back hand but boy, the hours that we'd have to spend on the courts to achieve that kind of skill, we just will not consider.

I think we'd all like to have the consistency of old Jack Nicklaus but to give day after day to the golf course like that, we just don't have the drive to do it. Many of us who studied English at school would like the idea of writing like old Solzhenitsyn [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russian dissident writer before the fall of communism] but the daily self-discipline that's required to produce that kind of skill, we just won't face at all. And isn't it true that in many, many other things, we like the thing and we want it but we're not prepared to pay the price. In fact a lot of you who are parents must have often said that to your sons and daughters, "Oh yeah you want it but you're not prepared to study for it or you're not prepared to work for it." And really as we've said that to them we've been barely aware that we were preaching pretty well to ourselves, because we're the same.

And that's the great watershed in Christendom too. That's the great watershed in Christendom. That's the great divide that separates those who will live forever from those who will live the life of mediocrity. It's this whole business, loved ones, of being prepared to suffer, being prepared to pay a price. And you know, I would have to be honest with you today, and say that probably there are some of you who will never pay the price. I know we all like to sit here and think, "Oh no, we're such a nice group of people and we're obviously all enthusiastic about Jesus, surely we'll all probably be kind of drafted into heaven en masse." Well no, there are some of us here that will

never pay the price, that will keep on listening, listening, listening and, saying, “Oh that’s good, oh I’m for that, oh I agree that’s the answer to the world’s problems.” But we ourselves will never actually pay the price.

Now what I’d like to share for a few minutes this morning is what that verse actually means, or the last half of it. It says, “We are heirs of God and we’re co-heirs with Christ, provided that we suffer with him, we shall also be glorified with him.” Now I’d like to try to define clearly what we mean by suffering there because there is a lot of suffering that doesn’t fall into this category.

You know how during the past few weeks, we’ve been sharing how we men and women have misunderstood the reason why the world was created. We’ve misunderstood why we’re here, and we’ve misunderstood the attitude that we ought to have to the Creator of the world and to the world itself.

You could illustrate it by the attitude of the little boy whose father loved him just more than words could express and it was coming up to Christmas time, and the father wanted to have the greatest Christmas he ever had had with his little son. And so he went out specially and looked for the thing that would give the fellow the most joy and that they could both enjoy giving and receiving together most of all at Christmas, so that they could be together throughout the Christmas Day. And at last he found the bicycle. And he bought the bicycle and Christmas morning came, and he gave the little fellow the bicycle and the little guy’s eyes just lit up and he leapt on the bicycle and went out the driveway and the father didn’t see him the rest of that Christmas Day.

And really the son was delighted with the gift but he had really missed the whole point of the father’s giving him the gift. And the father gave him the gift so that they’d both enjoy Christmas together more than they’ve ever done before and the little fellow of course, misunderstood the point of the gift. And he tried to get from that gift, what really he could only ever get from his father and that’s what I think we’ve been saying about ourselves. We’ve misunderstood the point of the gift and repeatedly, we’ve looked to the bicycle that God has given us or the green trees, the cars, the jobs, and even just the sea and the lakes and the river, we’ve looked to the whole world and to the people in it to get what we really only can receive from the giver.

In other words, we’ve looked at the one gift he happens to have given us and we’ve thought of it as the source of all our personality needs rather than him himself. And that’s the predicament that most of us are in. We just automatically look to the world and look to each other to fill the personality needs, we have. The psychologists have outlined those needs ad infinitum and we’ve often talked about them ourselves: that we all have the need for approval and we all have a need for recognition, we all have a need for happiness, we all have a need for security. And the problem with us human beings is we have looked to the world to supply those things, we have looked to the people to supply them. And yet every time we’ve done that it has been a mess.

Onassis [Aristotle Onassis, a very wealthy Greek shipping businessman – He married US president, John F. Kennedy’s widow Jacqueline Kennedy] would be just a great example of a fellow that would seem to have fulfilled the need for security very completely by using the world and the oil tankers.

And yet, I think you’d agree that he seemed at the end to be a man who was very insecure. In spite of the fact that he had tried to buy the security by having all the possessions he could possibly want and providing himself with millions of dollars of food and clothing and shelter. Yet it seemed at the end of his life he was more insecure than many of us and more disappointed, especially in regards to his son’s death. Even old Hughes [Howard Hughes, Jr., American business magnate, investor, aviator, aerospace engineer] our own billionaire, he seems utterly to have failed to buy security, doesn’t he? He seems to be a man who has used the world more than even any of us, to try

to ensure that he had security and yet at the end of the day, you find him locked up in hotel rooms, fearful it seems of something that will do him harm but so much so that he is the picture of insecurity.

And it's the same if you go to the great esthetes of our world, if to go to somebody like Oscar Wilde [1854–1900, an Irish writer and poet] who tried to find happiness from just the world itself. Or you go to old Hugh Hefner [American magazine publisher, as well as the founder and chief creative officer of Playboy Enterprises] who has searched continually for that tremendous exhilaration that will come in that moment of emotional satisfaction or physical satisfaction. When you look at these men you seem to find frustration written across their faces rather than real satisfaction. And so the people who have been most successful among us, in looking to the world for security and in looking to the world for happiness, seem to be the most frustrated of us.

Many of us have looked to the world for approval but you find the dictators of our history books are perhaps the men who've done that more than anybody else. You know how we seek approval from each other and the only way to do that finally, is to get control of as many people as possible so that they can't do anything else but approve of you. And yet when you look at the great dictators, Napoleon or Hitler, they seem at the end of their life to be men who have no sense of approval, who have a great sense of recrimination rather than approval in their own lives.

And loved ones, what we've said of course is that it's not just a matter of looking at these men and pointing the finger at them, because we ourselves, we human beings, have done the same thing. We've tried to live without the approval of our Father who made us. We've tried to get away from having to please him and get his approval on our lives. And instead, we've tried to substitute everybody else's approval that we could get our hands on. And so we find ourselves trying to use the world and use society and use each other to get that approval. We find ourselves very frustrated by it.

We've tried in the same way to do without the happiness that comes from a close relationship with the Creator who made us. We've tried to get away from having to be close to him day after day. I mean you have to pray every day and we've tried to get away from that horrible thought that we need the only happiness we can find finally that satisfies us will be his love and we've tried to live as if we weren't his children, and yet somehow get the happiness that only his children can have. And so really we've tried to get love and affection from all kinds of other people to try to give us that happiness. And we find that really we're miserably frustrated about the whole attempt.

I think we've tried to live as if we were just his creatures. As if we didn't owe him anything and he didn't owe us anything and we could do what we wanted with our lives. And we have tried our lives as if, "No, if he doesn't supply it, we will get it ourselves." And we've dedicated our lives to getting all the food, shelter and clothing that we need. And yet we seem very dissatisfied with what we've got. And so that's the problem that I think many of us have faced. That we've, like the little guy on Christmas Day, we've looked to the bicycle to try to supply the security and the approval and the happiness that really can come only from a close relationship with the Person who made us and only from treating him as our dear Father.

Of course, many of you this morning might say, "Well, I've tried that. I would gladly treat him as my father if I could. I want real security and I want real happiness and I want a real sense of approval in my life instead of this sense of guilt or having failed that I so often have. I want that and I've tried to produce that kind of attitude, I've tried to treat God as my father, I've tried to do it." I think many of us would say that, you know. We've tried to treat God as our

father. We've tried to love him as our father and trust him as our father but we cannot. And loved ones of course you cannot.

God has only one only begotten Son, who enjoys the approval of God and enjoys the happiness of God's love and enjoys the security that God gives him in providing all that he needs. God has only one only begotten Son. And you can't imitate that Son's attitude, because you're not the only begotten Son of your Creator. You're just a creature. And you can't behave like a son if you're just a creature. You can't go up to somebody else's dad and say, "I'm going to pretend you're my father, I know you're not, but I am going to pretend that you are my father. And I'm going to have the same attitude of love and trust in you as your own son has." You can't do it, loved ones.

You can't psych up inside yourself an attitude of trust towards the Creator of the world as your loving father who will supply you with everything you need, unless you are in fact his son. And that's, you remember, what we shared before. That the miracle is, that God is able to send into you, the attitude of trust that his Son has towards him. He's able to send that into you by a miracle. Now it's in Galatians, loved ones, if you look at it, the verse where that promise is made to us by our Creator. It's Galatians 4:6, "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son. So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir." And the miracle is, that God has sent into many of our lives here, the spirit of his own son and that spirit inside you is able to enable you to treat God as your father. And that's really the miracle. And so it is possible to come into such a loving, trusting relationship to the Creator of the world as your father that you can get from him all the security and the happiness and the approval that you need.

And here's where we come to the suffering bit. You can't please the Pharisees and please your Father at the same time. You can't get the approval of the Roman soldiers and get the approval of your Father at the same time. You can't get happiness from God and happiness from the world and other people at the same time. It's either or. God's plan is that we should not get all the happiness, security and approval from the world. His plan is we should not get all the security and the happiness and approval that we need from the world and from other people. His plan is that we should get it from him, from a loving relationship of sons and daughters to our Father. Now loved ones, the truth is that you can't have "both and". You can't be dependent on God and dependent on the world. You can't be independent of the world and independent of God. It's either one or the other. You either get your security from God or you get it from society. You get your happiness from God or you get it from society. But you can't have "both and".

And that's where the suffering comes in, you see. You either get those things from your dear Father in heaven, or you get them from the rest of us. And so every time you lose a girlfriend, every time you lose a father, every time you lose a dear husband or wife, every time you lose somebody whose affection has been dear to you -- through faith, God is able to lead you out of that heart rending experience of suffering into a place where you look to him for the affection for which their affection was only a shadow. So do you see the situation? We all have been for years, looking to each other for these things. God cannot wean you from that without suffering, he cannot.

You know it loved ones, you know, you can make all the promises you want, "Lord I am going to look to you for affection, I am not going to look to my wife, I am going to look to you. I am going to look to you Lord, not my girlfriend, I am going to look to you." And loved ones, they are words, aren't they, they are words. Because we take a little bit of affection from him and a little bit of affection from them and we like to say we are really dependent on him but when it comes to the

crunch, and we lose them, we see whom we were really depending on.

Do you see that missing a vacation, missing a show, missing the joy of a certain job is used by God through the midst of the suffering to bring you into a place where you will no longer depend on those things for your emotional satisfaction? Though really, dear ones, we are honestly like people with about 25 crutches under each arm, we really are. And there we are walking along and if one breaks we use the other and if another breaks, and we have aluminum ones, we have steel ones, we have wooden ones and, if we lose all the crutches, then we have a rope on the roof and we can hang on to it. We have everything to keep us from having to depend on the father who made us for all that we need. And God's task is to gradually allow Satan -- because God does not send the things himself -- but to allow Satan through the suffering that he brings, it is God's task to use that suffering to wean us gradually away from those things. So it goes right through everything, you know. Lack of approval of our peers, of our professors, of our parents, of our friends is used by God through suffering to wean us away from their approval, and seek the approval of the only one significant other in the world who really counts.

So every time we miss or have to do without others' approval, the Holy Spirit is working inside us to enable us to accept that with the same patience and faith that Jesus accepted his suffering and to come through free from that approval. And it's so loved ones, throughout our whole lives. Every time we have a failure in a job, or a failure in a certain career, or a failure to attain the goals that we have set up for ourselves, the Holy Spirit is in there trying to point out to us that all the approval that we would get if we ever succeeded in that job would never make up for the approval that we are to seek from the Father alone. And so loved ones, every failure is used by God to bring us to the place where we die to failure to get other people's approval and we begin to seek his alone. Every lack of a car, or of money, or of food, or of clothing, every lack that we experience in material possessions is used by God in the midst of the suffering to get us to stop looking at our job, or ourselves, or our insurance policies to provide all that we need and instead to begin to trust the loving Father who has promised to give us our daily bread and to supply every need of ours from his riches and glory in Christ Jesus.

So loved ones, do you see that the most precious gifts, and I know this will sound mad to you, but the most precious gifts that God can give us are the trials and the deprivations and the desolations and the defeats that we all experience in this life. Those are the most precious gifts. Because God is using the suffering that we endure in those to wean us away from the bicycle, to wean us away from seeking the world and other people for approval, and for happiness, and for security so that we'll begin at last to trust the dear Father. And loved ones, you can see the position of invincibility that that puts you in. You can see why old Paul said, "I've learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content. I'm willing to be full; I'm willing to be empty." Loved ones, that is an invincible position, and that is a position the Father wants to wean you under.

So in order to be his heir and his son and his daughter, you need to stop depending on everybody else but your Father. So would you stop crying, would you stop crying? Would you stop beating your feet on the floor and thumping with your hands like a little baby every time the job is lost, every time you fail the exam, every time somebody else is talking about you behind your back? Would you stop behaving like a little cry baby all upset because your father is trying to wean you away from some of your crutches because he knows loved ones, that those things are not going to last. Do you see that?

Do you see that finally your dear husband is going to die? Do you see finally that great boss that

you have and that miserable office is going to die? Do you see that the miserable fellow who set that stupid exam is going to die? And that none of their approval is going to mean two bits to you in 50 years time. And that what the Father who loves you is trying to do is, through allowing these things to be taken away from you, through the suffering that comes from it, to get you to begin to look to him, and not to those others. So loved ones, that's it; provided we suffer with him, we shall be glorified with him. And provided you're willing to let go of those things, the Father will give you something better.

Just the one last image. You know what it is. The little baby, sucking at the rattle and the mum has a bottle of real milk to give it, but it's sucking at the rattle and she tries to get the rattle out of its hands, but it won't leave go, because this rattle is the greatest thing it has. And it's stupid -- the rattle will not give it any nourishment at all but, it's sucking away at this thing and it wants it instead of the real milk. Well, you know, what about our rattles? Those are all the little things that we're holding onto and which are only substitutes for our Father. Have you started to suffer? Okay, then God has started to work the attitude of his Son into you. Do you fly away from suffering? Then you'll never come into the trust of his son. That's it, loved ones.

Now I know that it's not easy so I really pray that God will make that real to you in your situation, because I think the great temptation is to go out this morning and say, "Oh, he was talking about incurable cancer." No, I was talking about the fact that your lunch may not be ready for you today when you go home, or I was talking about tomorrow when maybe you lose your job. I was talking about the ordinary things that come to us. That is it. Let us pray.

Dear Father, it seems incomprehensible to us that we could find our whole satisfaction in you. But Lord we do see that that's what you're trying to show us in Jesus. Father, for so many years we have just assumed that we could only live if we got approval and recognition from other people. For years we have assumed that we could only live if we got satisfaction for our emotional desires and our physical desires from other people. But Father, we begin to see that in a loving close relationship of trust with you we could receive all these things. So Father, many of us are not at that point yet, but we would give you the right Lord, to allow us to come into whatever suffering you think we can bear in order to wean us away from these poor substitutes and in order to work in us, the heart of your own son Jesus. So Father we would commit ourselves to you now for that and Holy Spirit will you remind us when were in the midst of a situation, would you remind us and give us an awareness of the covenant we have made this day. Father we make this covenant with you, whatever it costs, however much we must suffer, will you wean us away from dependence on the world, your dear gifts to us, and to other people -- and will you bring us into the place where like Paul, we look to you for all the approval and the security and the happiness that we need. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.