

How Do You Know What's Right?

Romans 9:1

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Today, loved ones, we are getting back to the real purpose of meeting over these years which is to study the book of Romans. It is a letter written in 57 A.D. by Paul, one of the early Christian leaders, to the group of people in Rome who believed that Jesus was the Son of the Creator of the universe. This letter is known as Romans in the Bible. Down through the centuries of our era, it has been used to bring supernatural revelation to men and women again and again to pull us back from a deteriorating relationship with our Creator. It really has.

Luther talked about "fides sola". In Latin "fides" means faith and "sola" means alone. Faith alone. Not endless good works to please a tyrant judgmental God, but faith alone that this God loved us and was willing to receive him into His own arms if we were willing to trust Him and obey Him. "Fides sola" was discovered by Martin Luther as he lectured in the book of Romans in the university, and so Romans was used, really, through Luther to bring about the Reformation.

In the 18th century, an evangelical revival came about primarily through the influence and preaching of a man called Wesley, who said, "I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, when he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had forgiven my sins, even mine, and had saved me from the law of sin and death." And so Romans was used again, this time to transform England from a potential French Revolution situation into a source of life throughout the world of that time.

And then, loved ones, it is important to point out to those of you who may not know, that all that you see around you here, this building, these walls which used to be painted white wood, the downstairs on the ground floor, you remember where General Pants ran a half hearted store. The rest of the downstairs was more like a warehouse, there was nothing on this floor at all and the basement had nothing in it. Luther Hall was owned by the dear Lutherans and, I have to be careful now, I don't think it had the life in it at that time that it has now. All of this has come about by the brothers and sisters here this morning who have been listening to Romans for the past seven years and who during that time have been matching their life with what they heard. This book has transformed all that you see around you here into what it is today. And, we believe it is this same book that will get 10,000 of us abroad for Jesus over the next quarter of a century. So that is why the book of Romans is kind of precious to us and precious to the whole race of mankind.

What I would like us to do is to begin the crucial chapters, Romans 9, 10 and 11, which deal with massive issues. They are issues like predestination and free will, issues like the place of the Jews in history, and most important, the issues of our daily life and how we are relating to our Maker. So, let us read Romans 9:1. I think it will begin to make sense to you.

How do you know what is right? Most of us here probably ask that question in some form or another every week. How do you know what's the right job for you? How do you know when it is the time to move? How do you know when it is time to change the place where you live? How do you know which are the right relationships for you? How do you know whether your attitude to certain people is right or

wrong? There are all those "how do you know what is right" type questions.

Then there are the moral problems. How do you know what is the right thing to do and what is the wrong thing to do in your situation? How do you know when you are rationalizing what is right when it is really wrong? And you know yourselves, loved ones, that many of us here, either because of the generation we are, or because of our age, fail completely to commit ourselves whole-heartedly to anything because we have great uncertainty in our life about what is right and what is wrong. Many of us have the graduate school syndrome throughout our lives. That is, we will do anything rather than make a decision because we are not sure which decision to make. Many of us are living half-hearted, half-satisfying lives because we really are uncertain about what we should be doing and about many things in our lives.

If I could talk with each of you individually, I would probably find that to be true in some way in your life. You are living a mealy mouthed, watered-down, diluted existence because you are primarily trying to avoid making a decision. That is what you spend most of your life doing -- trying to avoid making decisions or making irrevocable commitments. You are always trying to keep yourselves in a position where your options are always open. Of course, the only way to do that is to try to believe everything and to end up believing nothing. Many of us fail to have any excitement or satisfaction in our lives because we spend our whole life avoiding commitment to anything because we are not too sure to what we should be committing ourselves to.

Brothers and sisters, I ask you to apply that to your job. Just your jobs, what you are doing now. How many of us in this auditorium are involved at this moment in jobs that we really aren't sure that we should be in? Maybe that isn't too bad; the really bad part is how many of us in five years time will be involved in jobs that we really aren't sure we should be in. Primarily, because we are not really sure in our own hearts what is vitally important to give our lives to. So most of us spend our lives running them by everyone else's opinion -- by the TV commercials, by everybody we hear teaching anything. Loved ones, if you look at your own life, you will see that a great uncertainty comes because you have never really settled what is right and what is wrong. Now this first verse of Romans 9 gives three very clear guidelines so that you can know what is right and what is wrong.

Many of you probably know of Francis Schaeffer. Every Friday evening, at 7:00 P.M., there are three or four hundred of us who meet here. We are probably the biggest class in the Christian Corps School. We meet and watch a film for about half an hour and then we divide up into classes or discussion groups to talk for about an hour. The presentation in the movie and in our discussion afterwards is based on the work of Francis Schaeffer. He's probably one of the outstanding evangelical Christian philosophers and theologians of our time; he has a study center in Switzerland. He writes books that are known throughout the world dealing with the theme that the confusion in our personal lives (like we have been talking about), the confusion in our national life, the confusion in our international life, comes from the fact that mankind has no infinite reference point for what is right and what is wrong.

In other words, he says the confusion that we are all in personally, nationally and internationally comes because we have no infinite reference point -- we have no absolute certainty about what is right and what is wrong and about what life is about. So, we end up in this continual confusion. He says we are all involved in regarding "right" as that which is useful or convenient or advantageous to us at this point in time, and what is "wrong" is that which is not convenient and advantageous for us at this time. He says that the whole world is involved in this. It's involved in a relative

idea of what is right and what is wrong. Right is relative to what you need today. Wrong is relative to what you don't need today.

He says, of course, the only way we are ever going to achieve any peace or steadiness or stability or order or any freedom from confusion in our own lives is to come to the point where we at last catch on to some absolute standard of values. Things that are right and wrong whenever or wherever, whatever we are. He says that we are practicing the theory of relativity in our ideas of what is right and wrong and that is why we have such confusion in ourselves. He says some of you think it is wrong to steal big things, but it is okay to steal small things like pens and books. Because you have that relative idea of right and wrong, you never come to any certainty in your own life. That has become such a way of life that we can't imagine any way that would affect our lives. And yet we all admit that most of us move all of our lives with great uncertainty about what we should be doing. Most of us feel we haven't yet found what we should be doing with our lives.

Schaeffer says that many of you think that it is wrong to commit fornication, but it's right to be in bed together if you truly love each other. He says this is what is bringing confusion and lack of order into your own life. You really never are sure what is right and what is wrong. Indeed, you are the source of your own right and wrong. Your idea of values and standards are purely relative. The problem is that you never know when a thing is right all the time and when a thing is wrong all the time.

Now, loved ones, that is the first step you need to take in your own life. If you are uncertain about whether you are in the right job, really, don't take that away from the moral thing. I think some of you have a feeling this morning, "I can be uncertain about what is right and wrong, and yet I ought to be able to be certain about what job I am doing." No, it is all linked together. The only way you will come into any order or peace so that you absolutely know what is the right job for you, what is the right thing you should be doing with your life, where you should be living and what church you should be going to, is to get someone who is an absolute source of authority for you. That is, someone who is outside yourself, someone who is separate from your own life, someone who is not being influenced by what is convenient for you. The only hope of finding any peace and order is to find some authority outside yourself who represents some standards and values.

Now who is that someone to be? Well, really, you would be in better shape if you chose anyone apart from yourself. You would, you'd actually be better if you chose anyone, even your pet dog. It would get you out of running your own life. But, I would suggest to you, "Is it not wise to try to work out who made this universe, who runs the whole operation, and then find out, if possible what that person thinks is right and what he thinks is wrong? Is that not a wise thing? Don't we stand a better chance of being more correct if you chose that one, than if you chose someone else?" Now, that is why I, myself, chose Jesus.

I believe Jesus of Nazareth is the only begotten Son of the Creator of the universe, and I believe that when He speaks, the Creator speaks. Jesus' notions of right and wrong are what my Creator thinks is right and wrong. But, loved ones, you don't even have to go that far with Jesus. You can be sitting there this morning thinking, "Jesus may be a prophet or a good man. He may not be the Son of God at all." That may be your attitude, but I would suggest that there is another reason for choosing Jesus. Anybody who is anybody, whether they are philosophers, agnostics, atheists, or Buddhists will say that the greatest ethical teacher in the world is Jesus. And the most perfect life that was ever lived was Jesus' life. Even if you compare him with Confucius or Socrates, Jesus is streets ahead of anyone else. Whether you deal with an agnostic like old Bertrand Russell or

whether you deal with a philosopher like John Stuart Mill, or whether you deal with a Unitarian, they all come up with the same opinion. The most perfect life that was ever lived was that of Jesus of Nazareth.

Here's a Unitarian who speaks: "Jesus was the greatest soul of the sons of men." The Unitarians, of course, reject the divinity of Jesus but say He was "...a man of genius of religion, one before whom the majestic minds of Grecian sages and Hebrew seers must veil their faces. What man, what church, what sect has mastered His noblest thought?" John Stuart Mill, a cynical philosopher, says that above all, the most valuable part of the effect on the character which Christianity has produced by holding up a divine person is a standard of excellence and a model for imitation which is available even to the unbeliever and can never more be lost to humanity. For it is Christ, rather than God, who Christianity has held up for believers as a pattern of perfection for humanity. So, loved ones, even if you don't believe in Jesus' divinity, it is reasonable to regard Jesus as your absolute authority on what is right and wrong. Because he lived the most perfect life that was ever lived.

Now, I think some of you dear Christians are saying at this moment, "Ah, that is great! It is just what these old agnostics need. They just need that kind of preaching." But, do you know that many of you Christians say Jesus is your absolute authority and He really isn't? You have not really established a relationship of trust with Jesus so that you obey Him whatever He says. You do not heavily depend on Jesus as an authority in your life. You depend on Bill Gothard's version of what Jesus says. You depend on Billy Graham's version or Watchman Nee's version or you depend on Malcolm Muggeridge's version or you depend on your pastor's version of what Jesus says. Or, like many of us, you depend on the version of the last person to whom you spoke about what Jesus said. That is why many of you who call yourselves Christians live very half-hearted lives. You live half-satisfying lives because you do not have a relationship of respect and trust towards Jesus Himself. You actually shop much as a shopper does in a supermarket. You really do. You just walk down the aisles: Bill Gothard is easy there, Graham is easy there, Muggeridge is easy there, and you choose.

You are still your own source of authority. You say that you have an absolute standard of values, and you say that you have an infinite source of what is right and wrong, but actually, you are the source. You just pick and choose. Many of you who regard Jesus as your absolute authority are at the moment involved in doing things or not doing things that you know He doesn't agree with. Well, He isn't your source of authority then, do you see that? Actually, you are your source of authority. You obey Him when it suits you, and you disobey Him when it doesn't suit you. The freeing, delivering experience of having an absolute source of authority comes only if you regard Him and His Word as absolute and don't tamper with it and don't touch it and don't select from it. That is the only way you will ever be delivered from self; you must regard Jesus as the absolute authority Himself.

Now, what many of us are doing is what the people described in the book of Judges were doing. It is Judges 21:25: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." And I think many of us who proclaim Jesus as our authority are really like that. We all do what is right in our own eyes. We agree with Him on the big issues. Don't shoot your mother, and don't poison your father. We are all wild on don't go to war and the big deals. But, the little things, not criticizing others and being clean in our minds, are where we just select. He is not our authority. We say, "He is our Lord," but He isn't. If He isn't Lord of all, He isn't Lord at all. Many of us say, "Oh, Jesus is my authority, but I don't seem to have the peace and the joy and the freedom that He is to bring into my life." It is because He isn't your authority. You talk big, you say He is your Lord, but He is only your Lord when it suits you to make Him your Lord. He isn't your

absolute authority.

Loved ones, the first step in coming into a sense of what is right and wrong in your own life is establishing someone as an absolute authority in your own life whose word you will accept, to whose word you will adapt your life without tampering, without toning down or diluting that word. Why not choose the person who is universally regarded as the greatest teacher and the most perfect person who ever lived -- Jesus!

Now, the second step is adapting your life to Jesus' general directives. There are plain, general directives he gives you. He says don't spend your life accumulating money and possessions that can be lost or stolen and that can disintegrate in time. Don't make that the chief target of your life; don't spend the greater part of your life doing that. As you adapt your life to that and as He says, "I want you to not be anxious or not worry about things" -- as you do that, Martha, you have to do it. Do you see you're not doing it when you say it's alright for Him? Or when you say it's alright for you? You are only doing it when you stop worrying.

Loved ones, can I impress that upon you? Because we have done a good job on ourselves in our society persuading ourselves we are utterly justified in believing that a certain thing is right and not doing it, and further persuading ourselves we cannot possibly do what is right. You can do what you want to. You could actually, if a few of us helped you, stand on your head at this moment. You could do anything you wanted. You really can. You can do exactly what you want. You can open your mouth at this moment; you can close your mouth. You can think a clean thought at this moment; you can think an unclean thought. You can actually do what you want.

That is why I say, as you adapt your life to Jesus' general directives such as not accumulating money and possessions and making that the chief thrust of your life and not worrying or being anxious, but, instead, spending your life sharing His thoughts and His life, you will actually begin to know what is right to do in the specific things in your life. I know I sound like an old worn out record, but do you see that it actually only works if you DO that. It does not work if you say, "You are dead right, Pastor, those are good things, and I'm for them, and I'm going to TRY to obey them." No, it is as you adapt your life to those things, independent of anything else.

Let me explain through an example. I try to swim most mornings. Some mornings they forget to heat the pool at the athletic club. I go up to the pool and put my toe in the water and shiver. Then I could say, "Well, I'm going to try to get in." But you know fine well I'm not in until I just jump right into the water. And that is the only way to do it. You have to just jump right in and forget the cold. You see, that is what obedience is. Obedience is not--"Oh, well, I would like to give my life to that, but I would like to be in IDS and sell stocks and shares and make a million as well." That is not obedience; that is disobedience trying to rationalize itself into obedience. Obedience is doing what you know is right, whatever the consequences are going to be.

As you adapt your life to Jesus' general directives such as not worrying and not being anxious, that means you stop worrying and stop being anxious even though you don't know what is going to turn up tomorrow. As you adapt yourself to his general directives to not spend your whole life accumulating money and possessions which are going to rust or disintegrate or be stolen, spend your life sharing His life and His thoughts, your conscience will do two things. First, your conscience will begin to constrain you and constrain your will to act according to all of Jesus' commands. Your conscience will actually come in and aid you. That is why Paul says that his conscience bore witness with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives the commandment that Jesus gives, and the conscience actually

will side with that.

Of course, the conscience is only as valuable as the values that your mind grasps. Your conscience is only valuable to you insofar as your mind grasps worthwhile values. Your conscience simply urges you to live up to standards that you have in your mind. That is why it is dumb for anybody to say, "Oh my conscience is my guide, and I never do anything that my conscience doesn't tell me to do." You are laughing if you are a cannibal because a cannibal holds the idea that he can eat people. His conscience will just correct him as far as eating people is concerned. It will choose between a fat one and a thin one, but really all the conscience does is to act or constrain your will to live up to the best values that you have. A Mafia hit man can say, "Oh, I live up to my conscience." Well, he is laughing because he has been brought up to believe that it is just business to wipe out anyone who is inconvenient to him. So your conscience is only as good as the set of values that your mind grasps.

As you adapt your life to Jesus' directives, your conscience will come in on the side of Jesus' directives and will continue to urge you to obey them. Secondly, the Holy Spirit, a Holy Spirit that is in Jesus' own life, will begin to work and inform your conscience so that you begin to know what to do in the particular details of your life. Some of you say, "Well, I can obey Jesus in those big things about not accumulating money and about loving other people, but what do I do tomorrow in this situation?" As you obey God's general will coming through Jesus in the Bible, so the Holy Spirit will begin to inform your conscience on the little details that God has for you day by day. Now do you see that many of you have no guidance about those little things -- no guidance about which car you should buy, no guidance about where you should go in your life? Because you are not abiding by the big directives that God has given you generally that you can obey.

So if you are not obeying Him in the big issues, He is not giving you any light on the small issues. As you are continually saying to Him, "Oh, Lord, help me, help me. Show me which school I'm to go to. Show me which girl I'm to marry. Show me which car I should buy. Show me where I should move," heaven is silent because you are disobeying Him on many other plain commandments that He has given to you. Do you see that, loved ones? You can't expect detailed directives from God unless you are obeying His general directives. If you will abide by His general directives, your conscience will begin to be informed by the Spirit of Jesus so you will know what to do.

Now could I shock you? Do you know that God's will for us is to walk in absolute certainty? That's right! You may not believe it, but God's will is for you and me to walk in absolute certainty every moment of our lives. If you say to me, "Do you mean we should never be in doubt about _____?" No! There will be moments when you pause, but they won't be moments filled with worry and anxiety or concern. They will be just quiet moments when you know that God is going to show you the corner to turn when you come to it. Now that is the norm. The confusion and vagueness in which most of us move is because we are not abiding by Jesus' general directives for our lives. So your conscience begins to assist you.

However, the third step that Paul mentions is not simply having an absolute standard of authority; it is not simply abiding by your conscience. It is in Romans 9:1: "I am speaking the truth in Christ"--you have to have an absolute source of truth and the suggestion is that it is in Christ--"my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit." That is what we are talking about -- the conscience, informed by the Holy Spirit as a good and an authoritative guide. And the middle phrase, "I am not lying." If you live a lie, you will have no assurance of order in your life -- no assurance of what is right and wrong. You have to do what you know is right.

Another verse which will help many of us who have difficulties is John 7:17: "If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." Just a little verse, but it is the key to all certainty in our lives. If you do God's will, you will have certainty in your life. If you don't do God's will, you will be uncertain of things about which you used even to be certain. If you do God's will, if you do what you know is right, avoid what you know is wrong, there will be an increasing sense of certainty in your life, an increasing sense of order, and an increasing freedom from confusion. In fact, loved ones, I would say most of us of college age (I can't speak for the other loved ones) are confused because we are not obeying what we know is right. Some of you, when you come in to talk with me say, "Oh, I'm confused. I'm confused." Almost always it is not because you haven't read enough books; it is not because you haven't a good enough mind. It is because you are ignoring things in your life that you know you should be doing, and you are doing things that you know you shouldn't be doing. What happens then is that a whole spirit of darkness and error and confusion begins to fill your life.

So start this morning, all of you, with the questions: "I don't know who to marry. I don't know what job to take. I don't know where my life is going." Would you just start now on the things you do know you should be doing, and the things you do know you should stop doing? And those of you who have a relationship that is wrong and that is really sexually immoral, and you are sitting there thinking, "Well I just couldn't break that off; it is all of life to me." Loved ones, until you are hard enough with yourself to break that off, you are not obeying. You are just still your own source of authority. And those of us who are older, we are in the same boat. If it is tithing and you haven't tithed for years, you had better start tithing. If it is the income tax and you have been bluffing it for years, you had better stop it. There will be no order or guidance or direction in your life until you live up to the things that you know you should be doing. You can do that and you can start doing it this morning. So let us, each one, (I'm going to do it too) think of anything in our own lives that is conceivably causing the confusion and the disorder and the half-heartedness, the lack of commitment that we feel, anything that is causing the sense of drift that we have in our lives, the vague sense that we are going nowhere fast, and we are just treading water.

Could we look now at anything in our lives that could be the cause? And it is always things that you know you should be doing or shouldn't be doing. Would you quietly, whether you are a Christian or not, just for your own sake, commit yourself at this moment to start obeying what you know is right -- stop doing what you know is wrong? And I would further recommend to those of you who have no absolute standard that you begin to study Jesus' life and to see the way He thinks. See if you could begin to think that way yourself.