

The Purpose of the Law

Romans 9:4

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I'd like to make a small request of you. Will you tomorrow night go to the store nearest to your home and at midnight, will you break in through the display window and empty the cash desk and bring any valuables you can back here next Sunday? You know what you'll say, "No, it's not okay. I won't do it. I can't do it. Monday night is my bowling night." [Laughter.] But you know I was right in the first part, probably except for the Lutherans here or maybe some of the Baptists, but I was right in the first part -- you would say, "No. No, it's not okay, I can't do that -- but the second part you would not say, "No, it's not convenient for me to do it." What would you say? Some of us at some time in our lives might have said, "Well, I'm afraid I'd get caught." But we probably wouldn't say that. But why would you not do it?

Some of us might say, "Well, I wasn't brought up to do that kind of thing. My mom and dad didn't go on too many shop-breaking sprees in the evening. I just wasn't brought up that way." And yet, you know that a lot of us here were brought up in homes where certain things were considered all right and yet in later life, we've come to feel they're not right or indeed, the other way around. It's not just that we were educated or brought up in a certain way -- or was it your instinct? Is it your instinct that tells you that you are not to break into stores and steal things -- or is it what maybe benefits you? It would not benefit you to get caught or be imprisoned? And yet it does seem, loved ones, that we've often done the right thing against what our instincts told us to do.

So often there seems to be something that tells us we ought to do a thing even when our instincts urged us not to do it or vice versa. There seems to be something different from our instincts. Indeed, often this something makes a judgement between two instincts -- between the herd-instinct and the self-preservation instinct when it comes to trying to save somebody who has fallen into the water. Often, I think you'll agree, you've done what is right even when it didn't benefit you. So what we're facing is the great riddle of the universe: Why, in a world where men and women hate each other, get angry with each other, lose their temper with each other, kill each other, steal from each other, lie to each other for their own selfish ends -- why should they still feel that those things are wrong? Why do they still sense an obligation not to do those things even when they spend their lives breaking laws and trying to get around regulations? Why does mankind still sense inside an awareness that he should be different -- even especially in these days when we have the whole chaos of the terrorist activities and the whole tendency of our generation to kick over the traces -- why, however much we try to accustom ourselves to rebellion, why do we still feel inside that we ought not to do this?

That's really the problem that we face. It's really difficult to answer. You can say, "Oh, it's because we were brought up years ago or the founders of our race established certain laws and we've been kind of brainwashed by those." But you're only putting the question one step back. Why did the founders feel that when they themselves found it easier to lose their temper than to keep it -- when they themselves found a strong tendency to be selfish instead of unselfish -- why did they establish laws that suggested that we ought to be unselfish or that it was better to do right than to do wrong?

The dear Word of God gives an answer that Paul really was inspired to write and it states again what

we've just talked about. Romans 2:14 states clearly, first of all, the facts that we've outlined. That there is some center of awareness inside us that constantly urges to live up to the highest that we know in spite of the fact that we find it easier to do the worst instead of the best. Romans 2:14-15: "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them." And that's a fact, loved ones -- even people from primitive tribes that have no law seem to have something written into their hearts that make them feel they ought to do certain things.

If you go to the middle kingdom in Egypt, that was about 1200 B.C., you find there a fellow called Dally writing what is his alternative to Sominex [a sleeping tablet]. It has nothing to do with the Bible or Christianity. "If you find a large debt against a poor man, make it into three parts, throw out two and let one remain. You will find it like the ways of life. You will lie and sleep soundly. In the morning you will find it again like good news. It is better to be praised as one whom people love than to have riches in the storehouse. Better is bread when the heart is happy than riches under the weight of troubles." You know even the so-called pagans knew that there was something inside their hearts that was more at ease and more at peace when they did what was right than when they did what was wrong.

C.S. Lewis calls it the law of human nature -- the moral law that is within us. The conscience that has urged all peoples, even from the beginning of the world, to live up to the highest that they knew. And that's what it is, loved ones, a built-in conscience. Now what's the explanation of the origin of conscience? How do you explain conscience? In a world like ours, how do you explain that conscience continues to be so persistent? You must admit that our generation is famous for blotting out all the old prohibitions. Our generation is famous for trying to eliminate the difference between right and wrong. Now how does it come in a generation like ours that has tried more than any other to make itself at home with doing wrong? How do you explain the existence of this thing inside each one of us that makes us want to do what is right?

The Bible gives the answer -- a book that Jesus regarded as historical, whatever some of us, with our clever scholarships may think, he thought of it as historical. It's Genesis 1 if you'd like to look it up. Genesis 1 and verse 26: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him." That's the explanation. We were all made in our Creator's image and we've lost a lot of that image through the years. But there are several things in that image that are indestructible.

One is our desire to constantly bring things into order which is the basis of all educational theory, the desire of the mind for wholeness and completeness. Another is our self-determining abilities, our free wills. But another part of the indestructible image that we did not lose when we rebelled against God is the moral sense. That's why even the "Son of Sam" [a serial killer] in the midst of his seventh or eighth killing, feels strongly that he ought to be punished for what he's doing -- and that he needs to get caught to get some satisfaction for that sense within him that tells him that this is wrong every time he kills. This is wrong. Loved ones, it's because we were made in the image of God.

That's why conscience continues to work in all of us even to the very end of our lives. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God, for thousands of years that inner voice of conscience was the only thing that kept civilization from falling into chaos. For thousands of years there was no other

voice but the voice of conscience. That period is called “the period of freedom” or “the period of conscience”.

I don't know how much you all know about the Old Testament. For years, I knew very little. But there was a long period of time, loved ones, before there were any Ten Commandments. There was a long period of time, maybe thousands of years, maybe millions of years, the Bible really doesn't set a date on it -- but certainly for thousands of years, after Adam and Eve decided to live independent of God and to live life their own way and rejected his ideas, only the will of God revealed in the conscience of every man and woman did anything to hold man back from wrong, and to prompt him to do what is right. That is apart from the old revelation that God was able to get through to some people like Noah and Abraham who trusted him. But for thousands of years, apart from that old revelation, the only thing that held any kind of order in the world was conscience. That's known as “the period of self determination” or “the period of conscience” in mankind's history.

Yet you can guess that as men and women live more and more without God and sense more and more their insecurity about who's in charge of this whole operation and had to try to decide to establish some security for themselves, they more and more became greedy, more and more dominated each other. And as they did that, not only did they forget the original revelation of God that had been presented to Adam, but they began to confuse and obscure the original standards that were in their conscience. And that's in fact what happened.

For years, men would preserve in their tribal history a big memory of the record of the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden. That fall has been transmitted by Adam and Eve to their children and their children and their children's children. For generations that record of what had happened in the Garden was passed on down generation after generation after generation. But as men and women lived more and more their own way, they became more and more irritated by that story and they rejected it more and more. They began to twist it with all kinds of myths, the kinds of myths that you get later on among the Babylonians, or the kind of myths that even after that you find among the Greeks and Romans. They inject the original record of man's rejection of God with all kinds of stories that reduced the image of God to a level that would not be so hard for them to bear. They attached to the image of God all kinds of human characteristics -- so not only Mohammed's life is filled with stories of vengeance and hatred, but often the picture of Allah that is given by Mohammed is one that is nearer to the failures and the faults of human nature than it is to that of the Divine Nature.

That's what happened. We men and women are no fools. We don't let anything stay in our consciousness that is offensive to us. If it's an old grandmother that keeps laying down the law to us, then we stop visiting her. If it's some guy that keeps on bringing God's law before us in a way that convicts us then we just hear him once every three Sundays -- and that we can put up with. But that's what happened at the beginning. Mankind began to encrust the original record of the rejection of God with all kinds of additions of his own increments that reduced the image of God to such a human inconsistent faulty character that they could easily compare themselves with God and not be offended at all.

They did the same with the standards that God had planted in our conscience. It doesn't matter where you go in the world. No tribe, no primitive people thinks that selfishness is right. It doesn't matter where you go. Again and again, people who have been trying to bring civilization and the truth of God to other nations and other tribes have discovered, after learning the language, that

the tribe had strong feelings that selfishness was always wrong. They had strong feelings that it's always wrong to kill or murder. So wherever you go in the world's history, you find that everybody has those standards and yet what happened of course, was that men and women began to manipulate those standards. Godfather figures turned up in every tribe that said, "Now you shouldn't murder; that is, don't murder any of our tribe. Slaughter the rest if you want but don't murder our own."

Other godfather-type figures rose up and said, "Alright, adultery is wrong, adultery is wrong. It's certainly wrong for the women. It's justifiable for men, but it's wrong for the women." And gradually, all the original pure standards that were built into our conscience began to be reduced to their purity. And so the world got more and more chaotic and it began to manipulate the standards of conscience that God had built into every man until they were at the place where they could live with them comfortably without any effort.

Loved ones, it was into that chaotic, confused, obscure world that God spoke in 1400 B.C. He spoke to a man called Moses on a mountain top and he said, "Let me clarify this once and for all. You've known these things in your conscience down through the years. Now I'm going to say them plainly to thee. Have no other gods before me. Do not steal, Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Do not covet." And once again our world had clarity about what our Creator was really like. And that was the first purpose of the law: to clarify for us in our confused, obscure state of heathenism, to clarify what our Creator was like, what his views and his standards for our lives were, and how he expected us to live. That's the first purpose of the law, to provide God's standards clearly and to provide them in an objective way against which we could measure any other opinions of man. That's why Paul says in Romans 9 verse 4, "...to them [the Jews] belong the giving of the law."

Some of us of course have questioned the objectivity of it. We've said, "Well, is it objective?" The way we question it is that we question Moses' existence. We say, "Listen, maybe this man didn't even exist. Maybe what we have here is an opportunity for the sociologists of the time to present the ethics that had evolved in society up to that point. Maybe we don't have here any real interaction between Moses and God at all. Maybe we just have a mythological framework in which a bunch of sociologists or a certain school of ethical teachers sought to bring their own ideas or their own thoughts or the summary that they had made of social behavior up to that moment?"

Well, you know, it's a bit like saying, "MacArthur didn't exist." Tell that to the marines. "Moses didn't exist." Tell that to the Jews. They have better historical evidence for the existence of Moses that they have preserved down through the years than almost for any other historical figure. And the idea of summarizing the behavior that was praised in those days or the idea of it being an evolution of laws and good behavior and morals and hygiene that was practiced in those days was really refined stuff.

There was a book called "The Papyrus Ebers" in Egypt in 1552, B.C. If you had trouble with your hair falling out, this was what it said you should do. When it falls out, one remedy is to apply a mixture of six fats -- namely, those of the horse, the hippopotamus, the crocodile, the cat, the snake, and the ibex -- to strengthen it. Anoint with the tooth of a donkey crushed in honey. Now that was the laws of hygiene in that day.

Does Moses give us that kind of stuff? Is it that kind of law? Would you believe that throughout the Dark Ages, millions and millions of people were killed by plagues -- especially leprosy? Do you know how they stopped those plagues? They stopped them by reading Moses' laws in Leviticus, "All the days

wherein the plague, the leprosy shall be in him, he shall be defiled. He is unclean. He shall dwell alone, outside the camp shall his habitation be." They stopped the tremendous plagues in the Dark Ages by obeying the hygienic laws that Moses gave in 1400 B.C.

New York City caught up with Moses' method of washing hands fifty years ago. They had a series of deaths in the hospitals in New York and could not track it down at all. Then, they put into effect the same method of washing hands as is outlined in the laws of Leviticus.

Loved ones, no way can you say that those laws were a summary of the laws back then. They were utterly different. They were completely elevated from any laws of behavior that people practiced in that time. Some of us may say, "Well, can you be sure that we have the laws that Moses gave us?" You remember loved ones, the laws that Charles Leslie, the theologian, outlined for establishing whether a fact was historical or not. I won't bore you with all of them but he made the last two points that not only public monuments be kept up in memory of it but some outward actions be performed -- that such actions under observances be instituted and do commence from the time of the matter of fact was done.

Every night from that first day in 1400 B.C., hundreds and thousands and then millions of Jewish families have gathered around the table and have read the laws of God. And it is not the Jews that testify to that. It is all the enemies of the Jews that have persecuted them for years for that practice that attest to the fact of this continuous nightly oral tradition that has come down from 1400 B.C. down to the present day that ensures that these are the laws that were passed on by Moses.

It would really be like us somehow arranging for us to tell our children to tell their children (and so on) about Kennedy's assassination in Dallas for the next 3500 years. And at the end of that time, if you had an oral tradition like that, you'd be pretty sure about that piece of history. Now that's the kind of certainty we have, loved ones, that the laws in this dear book, are the laws that our Creator gave to Moses almost three and a half thousand years ago.

How do we deal with that law? Well, there are two ways in these days. One, we corrupt it -- and the other we ignore it. The bad guys corrupt it -- the ones with the black hats, the ones on the other side of the tracks. They say, "Adultery is wrong except in certain marital situations." They manipulate it. They corrupt the original law and they make chaos of their own lives. They say, "Fornication is ok if you really love each other." And of course, destruction follows psychologically as well as spiritually and socially. "Lying is ok if it is for national security reasons." So the bad guys corrupt it.

Now, I am glad to say, that if I asked you all to put your hats on, you'd all put on white hats because WE are the good guys! We don't corrupt it. We ignore it. Let me explain. We say, "You're right. Those are the laws of God and they are high above any other laws that man has ever received. Those are the laws that set forth our Creator's desire for our life -- they certainly are. But nobody can obey those -- they certainly know that. And if I was to depend on my obedience of those for my salvation, I would not be saved. I'm glad to say that God knew fine well that we couldn't obey those laws, and so he arranged that Jesus would die for all of those times that we will disobey those laws for the rest of our lives -- and if we just believe that, God accepts us." Isn't that near the truth of the gospel of the "good guys" or the evangelical Christians? It's not far off it. It's something like that.

I've often heard, "Oh, yeah, those laws, you can't keep them. And the only way you can be reconciled to God is that you believe Jesus died to cover all the times you failed to keep them. And that's how you get right with God." If that's the way it goes, why didn't Jesus say that?

If you look, loved ones, at what he said -- to be sure of it yourselves. It's Matthew 5:17-20, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

All of us who love generalizations say, "Well, on the whole, that's right. You should accept that principle. It's a good direction to aim at." And then Jesus is so good – he knows us so well. He gets down to the nitty gritty. (Matthew 5:21-22a) "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment."

Here's the truth. It's impossible to keep the laws if you remain as you are. That's why the laws are there. The laws are there to show you you are not what you can be. You are not the kind of person that God wanted you to be at the beginning. The laws are there to drive us to distraction. The laws aren't there so we can try harder and try harder and try harder and eventually succeed with our own human ability and willpower in obeying the laws. The laws are there to drive you to distracted helplessness.

That's really the second purpose of the law. It's in Roman's 7:13-15 "Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin." The moment you stop saying, "Everybody's human," and you start saying, "And Jesus said that I wasn't to get angry -- but I DO get angry. Now I can't avoid this anger on my own. Lord, will you do what is needed to change me? Lord, what is it in my own attitude towards life that prevents you from giving the patience that ruled your life? Lord Jesus, what is it in me that would get angry at the Roman soldiers if they were crucifying me? What is it in me that makes me want everything to go the way I want it to and that makes me displeased when it doesn't and makes me lose my temper when it doesn't and pulls people back under my control? What is it Lord, that I have not accepted that was crucified with you? Lord, Jesus, what way do I have to identify myself with you and your attitude towards life? In what way have I to let MY self die with you so that you can fill me with your Spirit -- and YOUR Spirit will automatically do these things? Your Spirit will NOT steal. Your Spirit will not bear false witness against its neighbor. Your Spirit will not kill. Your Spirit will not get angry. Lord, I'm carnal. The law is spiritual. I need to be changed -- and when I'm changed, I'll automatically obey these laws.

Loved ones, that is the purpose of the law. There is only one real definition of "law" -- and that's the definition you get in the law of gravity. The law of gravity is a description of a way that heavier-than-air objects behave if they are dropped. Heavier-than-air objects drop when you let go of them. That's the law of gravity. [Illustration on stage with a key.] The key doesn't have to say to itself, "I'm a key. I'm heavier than air. I must drop! When he let's go, I must

drop! I ought to drop. I have to drop. I'm a key. I'm heavier than air. I HAVE to drop!" No, it doesn't. It just drops. A balloon with nothing in it will do the same. Then you fill the balloon with hydrogen, a gas lighter than air, and the balloon rises. It doesn't have to force itself to rise, it just rises.

Loved ones, with the spirit in you, that you inherited from your mothers and fathers, your grandparents and great-grandparents, you cannot obey God's laws -- God's laws will be a constant burden for you. You live UNDER the law - not ABOVE it. You try to obey it, and are not able to. But, if you will accept that there is something in SELF that is wrong and that needs to be destroyed with Jesus -- and you begin to go to God today and say, "Lord, there IS something here that is not right. I know that you destroyed me in your Son, and you are able to recreate me as a new person. You are able to fill me -- not with hydrogen -- but with the Spirit that makes YOU so light and so blessed and so joyful, yourself. Lord, will you lead me into that and will you fill me with that Spirit so that I find myself naturally living according to these dear laws?" That's God's purpose, loved ones.

I'd encourage you who are fighting it, would you stop fighting it? Would you see that that's the purpose of the law: to drive you to distraction, to drive you to the point of helplessness where you see that I cannot do this the way I am. I have to be changed, Lord, if I'm ever going to live the way you described your children as living. Loved ones, you can do it today.

I came to the point in my life, even when I was a pastor, where I was keeping up the appearance of the old Christianity. But it wasn't real inside in regard to anger, jealousy and things nobody could see. It wasn't real there [points to his heart]. It was then when I discovered it was good to believe that when Jesus died our sins were forgiven -- but the real purpose of his death was to destroy that in me which will not live as God wants us to live and to fill me with that Spirit that can live no other way. When I came to that point and began to deal with Jesus intimately as a person and began to say, "Lord, Jesus, I know I was with you at the Cross. Will you make that real to me now so that I know what it means and that I am willing for what it involves?" Then Jesus did that, loved ones. And for the first time I knew the sense of the Spirit inside that makes you WANT to obey -- and it is so different -- wanting to obey with your whole heart instead of feeling you OUGHT to. That really can be yours today. Start there. Let us pray.