

Nominal Christianity

Romans 9:6

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I think probably every one of us have, at sometime, lain on our backs and stared up at the blue sky and just quietly, on a summer afternoon, wondered "Is there anybody way beyond that sky?" We've mused about it and thought about it, conjured up all the answers we are supposed to give according to our Sunday School teachers and our catechism books. And really, we have thought, "I wonder is there? Is there anybody up there at all?" Most of us probably come to the same conclusion: that it is very reasonable to believe there is. It is very likely that there is somebody there who has made us and all the world. I think we all feel we will never really know for sure, unless, somehow he makes a move towards us. Because we certainly can't reach. It's a bit like Mars and the Martians and all that stuff. You think "maybe-maybe, who knows, unless something from outer space communicates with us?"

Our Creator has been communicating Himself to us humans for thousands of years, and there are many of us here in this auditorium who have begun to treat Him in accordance with the kind of person He has revealed Himself to be. And we've found that our lives have changed -- changed from being poor little frustrated creatures struggling to survive in a hostile, impersonal environment. Instead, we've become confident children who believe that they live in the ordered world of their loving Father Creator. Many of us have found that here, many of us probably sitting beside you. We believe that the clearest communication this Creator has ever made was through His own Son Jesus, and for about seven years we've been studying one of the clearest explanations of what this Creator has done for us in His Son Jesus, one of the clearest explanations that exist. It occurs in the form of a letter which a man called Paul wrote to Christians in Rome in 57 A.D. It's regarded as the definitive explanation of how we ourselves can be related personally to the Being behind the blue sky. It's the definitive version because this man Paul knew Jesus when He was on earth, and this man Paul has been used more than any other man to broadcast Jesus' explanation of reality and his description of the Creator who made you and me.

You may remember about a month ago we studied the verses where Paul points out that the first communication from outer space to our earth came to a people called the Israelites. They're the people that we call the Jewish people today. These Israelites were the first people that God chose to reveal Himself to after God had created humanity and had seen it rebel against Him. Paul said He revealed Himself to these people as a dear Father who loved them and who had chosen them specially to receive His revelation of Himself. He revealed Himself as one who would be faithful in the agreements He made with them, as one who would tell them how to live here on earth successfully. He revealed Himself as one who would tell them how to establish a personal, direct relationship with Himself. Then He revealed Himself to them as one who would give them a homeland, who would protect their children, and as someone who would eventually send His Son to lead them. That is what Paul said in Romans 9:4, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen."

So, Paul tells us, they are the people who will be given a homeland by their God, they are the people to whom God will reveal how to relate personally to Him. They are the people whose children will be protected by their God, they are the people to whom God will give His own Son to lead them.

Paul then probably looked up and out of his window, and saw the Jewish people under the heel of the Roman Empire, their homeland occupied by foreign military, their money all going in taxes to their lords and masters. He saw the religion cut apart and sliced open by disagreements and arguments over ceremonies. Instead of the Son of God coming to lead them, he saw that they crucified this Son when He came. That was the contradiction or paradox that Paul faced. This was the people who would be specially blessed by the Creator, and here they are sliced apart.

In fact, we could carry it on even today. We see them in some sense with something of a homeland, but still in many ways a people that are scattered throughout the earth. That is why God led Paul to make the next comment, in verse 6; "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." But we tend to say, "Why? It looks as if the word of God has failed. These people were to receive the sonship and the promises and the covenants and the patriarchs and Jesus Himself, yet here they are scattered, downtrodden, and under the heel of the Roman Empire. It looks as if the word of God has failed." But he says, "No, it's not the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."

Paul says, No, no, you think that everybody who is called by the name of Israel is Israel in their own hearts. But that is not so. There are lots of people who live in Israel or who are regarded as Israelites, but are not Israelites in their hearts. In their attitude to God, they don't have the attitude of loving children who trust their Father, which Israel had, or Jacob had (his original name). That is why the promises of God cannot be made real to them, because the promises of God are not made to people who are outwardly Israelites. The promises of God are made to people who are Israelites deep down in their own hearts and lives. It is those who trust God inside to whom God can make His promises real. God does not make His promises real to people who do not have towards Him an attitude of trust and faith. Paul said that once before in Romans 2, and he puts it very clearly in verse 28: "For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God." So similarity in flesh and blood does not ensure that one is an Israelite.

Brothers and sisters, would you come with me the next step? This is really what I believe God wants to say to us at this moment. Turn to Romans 9:6, "But it is not as though the word of God had failed." Have you ever thought, "Well, that's not true in my life. I would say dare to say that I believe the word of God has failed in my life at times; that is, if you mean God's promises. I would say God's promises have failed in my life." Now, have you any sympathy with that statement at all? Do you have the feeling that, "I know I'm not supposed to say it, I know in order to be a good witness and all the rest I'm supposed to say God's promises have always been made real to me; but yes, I would say that I've often rationalized away the failures so that I wouldn't be found opposing God's word, so I could cling on to the little bit of faith that I had. Yes, I have found quite often that God's promises have not been made real to me. I keep trying to pretend that they have, but I have to admit that if I were honest, they haven't." Could it be that though you descend from Israel, you don't belong to Israel? Could it be?

See, the Father always keeps His promises. But He makes His promises to a certain kind of people. And if you're not that kind of person, the promises aren't even made to you. Could it be that you descend from Israel but you don't belong to Israel? Let me put it blankly and bluntly -- and really just be honest with yourself and leave aside all the self-defense mechanisms. Could it be that you're a nominal Christian? Could it be that you're a nominal Christian? If you have some doubt in your mind about whether God's promises have been made real in your life or not, if you're kind of

disappointed with some of the things that He's supposed to do for you, could it be that you're a nominal Christian, and that's why He hasn't been able to make His promises real to you?

Let me tie it down to one failure that I've seen in a lot of us who call ourselves Christians. God made a great promise about our reputation. It's in Matthew 5:11-12, and it's great and magnificent when it's real to you. "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you."

You come into a room and they stop talking and they kind of glance knowingly at each other. Or, you know fine well that in the office they're doing that, and you know that they're whispering behind their hands about you. Or, at times they just criticize you directly in conversation, or they put you down, or they stab you in the back. They may be your colleagues at work or at school or your friends.

Now God says if you're His child at that moment you will be blessed. Now the word is "makarios" and it means "happy" -- you will be happy at that very moment. If you look at the verse it says, "Blessed are you WHEN men do that.." It does not say you will be blessed someday when you get to Heaven. At that moment you will be happy, you will be utterly content with your circumstances, you will be utterly satisfied with the way people are treating you -- you will be utterly happy at that very moment. Now that is the promise.

Now what about you? Is it not true that there are many of us here in this auditorium who, when that happens, are just as paranoid, and as offended, and as hurt as the children of this world? Is it not true, indeed that when we are treated like that, when others criticize us or tear us apart or put us down, we're actually indignant that they should treat us that way? We feel they have no right to treat us that way; we are actually very nice people, they just have no right to criticize us like that. Is it not true that many of us in this auditorium, when that moment occurs-- at school, at work, or at home -- there does not rise up within us the Spirit of Jesus, who was quiet, and peaceful, and loving at the very moment He was being persecuted and insulted by Pilate and the Roman soldiers -- we do not find that spirit rising within us? We find instead a spirit of hurtiness.

We are hurt, we hurt, they hurt us. We feel it wasn't fair of them to hurt us like that. We are offended that they are not treating us fairly. Now is it not true that we are concerned because we have been put down? In fact, is it not true that many of us who call ourselves Christians seem to be more preoccupied with what people think of us than even people who aren't Christians? Is it not true that many of us in this room are VERY preoccupied with what people think of us and with our reputation? We guard our reputation and we get annoyed when it is torn apart. Now, do you see that that means that promise is not being made real to us?

I will tell you what I have done when I've found myself in that situation. I have always tried to look at my own life. I have tried to see if there is some condition in my life that I'm not fulfilling that is necessary to fulfill for God to make that promise real in my life. So that is what I do. I don't go to all kinds of "Do It Yourself" books, or whistle a little tune to feel happy. I say, "No, God is able to make this real in my life, He is able to make me happy inside when they are tearing me apart. He is able to do that, He is able to help me love a person who is stabbing me in the back. He is able to do that IF I fulfill the conditions." So I would ask you to do that.

Can we be any clearer on what a nominal Christian is? Well, isn't it true that most of us reject the cliché that America is a Christian country? Most of us accept Schaeffer's view that there is no longer a consensus in this country that homosexuality is wrong, fornication and stealing are wrong, that selling arms to other countries to slaughter each other is wrong. There is no longer a consensus in America that these things are wrong. So, undoubtedly America is not a Christian country. We do not identify being American as being Christian. We might vaguely accept America as being a Christian country from the point of view of its public life being set against the background of Christianity rather than Hinduism or Islam, but we believe not every American is a Christian.

But is it not true that many of you depend on your acceptance with God more on the company you keep than on your personal relationship to Jesus? Is it not true that most of us base our acceptance with God on the company we keep than on our personal relationship to Jesus? In other words, are there not many of us who say, "Well, I don't know if Jesus knows me, but I know He knows Billy Graham and I contribute to the Crusades. I don't know if He knows me personally or not, but I'm sure He knows Campus Church and He knows Pastor, and I'm a part of that. And when the body of Christ marches into Heaven, I'll march with them because I'm with them here."

Do you see how subtle it is? We who are brought up in a herd-instinct kind of society run a great risk of applying that to our own salvation. Is it possible that God's promises about reputation are not being made real in your life because you yourself are basing your acceptance with God and your salvation more on the company you keep, than on your personal relation with Jesus? In other words, are you a "Christian groupie"? Really, are you a Christian groupie? Groupies are ones that associate with the famous so that they can be a part of the thrill end excitement of it all.

Are there any more clues that would help us to know? Well, I can see that many of us who are Christian groupies find ourselves requiring constant fixes. Our hope of our salvation is based on our proving to our own satisfaction that we're one of "them". So when we go to Heaven we can say to the Lord, "We're with them, we're with them!" And because of that we find we always have to be with them. So when Corrie ten Boom comes to the Twin Cities, we're there, we're there! So, Norman Vincent Peale comes to the Twin Cities -- we're there. So, Billy Graham comes to the Cities -- we're there! So wherever there are meetings there we are, because our salvation depends on our confidence that we are the same as them and that means constant reassurance, constant fixes from more and more meetings.

Now the meetings are not the problem, although that can be tragic if it becomes a drug addiction or rather a frenetic occupation. The tragedy is not in attending the meetings, but the fact that we attend the meetings for our own sakes. We're constantly hoping that somewhere we will get something that will settle our stomachs; that we will get something that will at last give us peace inside, that will at last settle us, even though all this time we keep calling ourselves Christians.

And we are really like those people Paul talked about in his letter to Timothy. He said they will never arrive at the knowledge of the Truth, because they listen to this man this time, and that woman that time, and the next man the next time. They believe what the last one they spoke to believed and they will never arrive at the knowledge of the Truth. Now that is one of the marks of a Christian groupie. It is serious even if you just suspect that you're in the situation where you have no life in yourself so you try to constantly get it from other people. That should give you a clue that maybe you are a nominal Christian, and not really a Christian, because fellowship to you is something that enables you to get rather than enables you to give something.

Do you see that? There is a lot of silly talk among us about fellowship. I know, bless your hearts, I love you but sometimes you say, "I can't do without fellowship, I can't do without fellowship". Sometimes I shudder inside because it sounds like a heroin addict -- "I need another shot!" And really that is not the purpose of fellowship. The purpose of fellowship is that we would be able to minister together to others; so that I would be able to do something for somebody, and you'll be able to do something for somebody. Thus we would be able to complement one another in the life that God has given us. Fellowship is for giving, not for getting. But many of us who are groupies regard fellowship as a means of getting what we should get from God. We have no direct relationship with God so we have to live off the second hand experience of other people.

One of the other marks is even though we outwardly have some of the marks of a Christian, inwardly we lack many of those marks. We try to do what all the rest do, but inwardly we often fail to do those things. For instance, it is mentioned in Matthew, if you'd like to look at it. Jesus has shown me that this is our current example of our problem - Matthew 6:5-6, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

A Christian groupie loves Bible study groups. He may have two or four going each week. He's not so keen on prayer meetings, but he can suffer them a little if there's a lot of singing. But the tragedy about a Christian groupie is, that he has no daily Quiet Time of his own. He has no real relationship with God of his own. And so he thinks he can work himself into good private Bible study by attending all kinds of Bible study groups. He thinks that the failure to get anything out of his Bible in his own Quiet Time is due to lack of intellectual understanding and this he will get at a group meeting.

But the tragedy is that, all he is really, is a hypocrite. He's keeping the outward appearance of Bible study and prayer but inside in his own life he lacks the mark of a real child of God. And so a Christian groupie often is worn out trying to please the opinion of the group to which he belongs. That group opinion often has more to do with his or her behavior than what the Lord Jesus wants them to do. Often they will live double lives. One way at home and another way in the group in order to continually please the group and get the approbation or acknowledgement of the group; and therefore get reassurance in their own hearts that they're the same as the group, and that they'll all go to heaven together. They become more and more preoccupied with men's opinion. So if you're preoccupied with men's approval, you're immediately open to being hurt by men's disapproval. So when you go to the office the next day, and somebody criticizes you, you have the highway wide open. You live for men's approval, that's the basis of your Christianity. And so when somebody criticizes you, it cuts you right through, there is no defense, it just cuts you right open.

Now, loved ones, I can see that's why God is often not able to make His promises about happiness in the face of criticism real in some of our lives. Our own relationship with God is based more on being part of a group and on what the group thinks of us, than on any personal relationship to Jesus. Now would you think of that seriously? Start with the promises. Are there any promises that you feel God doesn't make real to you? Let me just put it straight to you - what about your reputation? Do you get hurt when people criticize you? Now stop pretending that that's human - that's carnal - that's not human. God's human beings were meant to walk with His approval and His acknowledgement alone necessary to their happiness. So it's not human - it's carnal.

Now do you get hurt when others criticize you, or when you are stabbed in the back? Now, loved ones, what I say to you is, without doing all kinds of big crisis examinations of your whole life, why not give yourself to Jesus anew this morning? Why not just say to Him, "Lord, some of the things that were said this morning apply to me. Lord, I don't know just where I am, but I want to get on the right terms with you personally. Lord, I'm going to forget all my dependence on this group salvation stuff and I'm going to forget this business of whether I'm like Pastor or like somebody else or whether I'm in the group here. Lord, I want to be right with you myself.

So Lord Jesus, I confess my sins to you now, especially this sin of depending on man's opinion instead of yours. Lord, I die to that. If you were willing to be insulted and to be treated as a common criminal on Calvary, and you want me to join you there, then I'm willing. I'm willing to be thought a fool or a failure forever. But Lord, I confess this sin now, I turn from it, I accept whatever you want me to accept in this life. And now will you give me your Holy Spirit and will you, Holy Spirit, come in and dwell in me and refresh me and enable me to have a personal relationship with God in my own private life?

Loved Ones, I would just say to you, why not do that now?

Let's pray:

Father, we thank you for stripping away all the pretence that there is in us, and Lord, thank you that it's in order to heal us, not in order to destroy us, but to heal us and make us whole. So Lord, we'd turn aside from all kinds of rationalization and justification that we would try to do at this moment -- where I try to say that I've been a church member for so many years, or I've been proclaiming myself a Christian for so many years. Lord, we forget all that stuff and here is an area where we have not allowed your promises to be made real in our lives.

Lord, we do get hurt when people criticize us, we are preoccupied with what they think of us. Often Lord, we've been more preoccupied with that than with anything you might say to us. We do depend on this group business, and we want to confess that to you now. We tell you, Lord Jesus, we want to know you yourself. Not to be friends of friends, not to know people who know you, but Lord, we want to know you yourself. Lord, we confess this sin of preoccupation with our own self-image and our own reputation. We accept our place with you on the Cross. We accept that from this day forward we have no right to anything but to be criticised or put down. Lord, we accept that joyfully because we know that if we commit ourselves to you and allow you, Holy Spirit, to run our lives, our Father will give us His acknowledgement and His recognition. And that alone means everything in this world.

So, Lord Jesus, we ask you now to come into us in the person of the Holy Spirit and enable us to be real Christians -- not just nominal. Enable us not only to be part of Israel, not only descended from Israel, but to belong to Israel and to be Israel for your glory. The grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and throughout this week and forever more. Amen.