

Free Will

Romans 9:18

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

There are two words in our language that cause all of us more unhappiness and depression than any other two words that we can possibly imagine. They are the two words "I can't." I'm sure all of us have labored under the ton of depression and defeat that falls upon us after we have cried out yet again, "I can't, I can't!" It doesn't matter whether it is in the morning when we should get up, and we say, "I can't" or we are at the table when we know we should stop eating for the seventy-seventh time and we say "I can't." Or, in an irritating situation where we need to keep our tempers and we need to be cool and calm and we say "I can't"; or in the midst of some academic or vocational difficulty and we call out "I can't".

Most of us know that half the time when we cry out "I can't", it is more because of the rising sense of hopelessness and inadequacy that is within us rather than the task itself. We seem to be defeated by the rising defeat that comes within us rather than the task itself. In fact, some of those tasks we have been able to do at other times, so it is really the rising sense of defeat, inadequacy, hopelessness and despair that causes us to cry out "I can't".

I don't think there is one of us in this room that has not cried ourselves to sleep or certainly had lots of agonizing self-examination and introspection because we have had to say, "I can't". The prevailing atmosphere in most of our popular thinking does not help us.

Psychologists like Skinner, [Behavior psychologist] who emphasized that we are virtually machines that are pre-programmed by our origins and our environments so that we can't respond any other way but the way that we have been programmed, tend to convince us that our lives are pre-determined. That if we came out of this kind of background we can't act other than people act that come from that kind of background. If we had this kind of origin as far as our father and mother were concerned, then we can't possibly act any other way than the way they act.

In a way, the old determinist psychologists are just modern day priests of the old pseudo-religions of the East, because that is the same story in all the Eastern religions. The story is fatalism. There are impersonal forces that are forcing you to be what you are and you can't act against them. You simply have to let your life unfold as the powers of fate impel you along. Of course, all this modern-day brainwashing and this ancient brainwashing serves to reinforce the feelings that many of us have already that we are doing our best but we just can't do it. We can't make it.

That view of mankind is absolutely wrong, absolutely and utterly wrong. We can tell that by the attitude of our Maker to us down through the centuries. Our Maker, who knows us better than any psychologist or any Eastern religion priest does, treats us as being free people. Our Creator never treats us as pre-determined fatalistic machines that can only act as we have been pre-programmed to act. Our Maker right from the very beginning has always treated us as people who have free wills. Would you look at that with me just to see how plainly it is set forth? In Genesis 2, at the very beginning of the world, some of the first words that our Creator ever spoke to us imply that we are free beings. Genesis 2:16: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'" Loved ones, it says you may freely eat of every tree of the

garden. You may say, "Oh, yes, but they are saying that we must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the midst of the garden."

It is a command. You don't give commands except to people who have free wills. Do you see that? You only give commands to people who are free to obey or disobey them. These are not commands in the sense that we send commands up to the space satellites. Those are directives that the satellite normally can't refuse. We are sending mechanical control up to that satellite so that it has to do what we say. Here we are talking about a command you give a person. You only give commands if the person is free to obey or disobey them. You don't need to bother giving commands if they aren't free to disobey.

In fact you can see that is what happened in Genesis 3:6: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate." Even though God had said "You shall not eat it," she also gave some of it to her husband, and he ate." So right from the very beginning of creation it is plain that our Creator treats us as being free people and we behave as free people. We prove our freedom by doing what he doesn't want us to do.

That is the impression that God gives us right down through history. Through His prophets, he again and again says things like you find in Deuteronomy 30:19: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." God says to choose life, implying that we can choose.

Now brothers and sisters, I know that we have shared this before, but I just know that so many of us here have been brainwashed by the old psychology of the determinists. So many of us have been brainwashed, even from what comes through the Eastern religions, that many of us have real doubts about whether we are really free. Do you see that the whole of this dear Word of God implies that we are? I quote to you that verse that probably all of us know, even those of us who don't go to church at all. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." "Whosoever" is a special English pronoun that means "anybody that wants". God gave his Son that anybody that wants could believe in him. That is the whole impression that we get right through Scripture. I point again to that pathetic picture of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, and I would remind you of the words: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" [Matthew 23:37] It is so plain that Jesus is saying, "Jerusalem, I want you to come to me, I want you to receive me, but I can't make you and you don't want to and I can't do anything about it."

It is the same thing with us. You may say, "Brother, why are you making this so strongly?" Because the verse we are studying today is misunderstood by many of us. Romans 9:18: "So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills." You know what we are like. We have an ability to forget utterly all the other verses that we have just quoted that imply that we have free will. We are able to forget completely about God's command to us in the Garden of Eden and about our disobedience to that command. We are able to forget the "whosoever" in John 3:16, we are able to forget Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, we are able to forget Elijah saying "Choose whom you will serve; if Baal then serve him, if God then serve him." [I Kings 18:21]

We are able to adopt tunnel vision when we see this verse and we forget completely that this verse

is to be interpreted in the light of the whole thrust of Scripture. We are able to get tunnel vision and say, "There it is. It is plain. God has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens anybody that he wants. God is sitting up in heaven looking down at us and saying, 'John, Peter, and everyone with 3 freckles on their nose I have mercy on you. There it is. Jim and Joan and everyone with black hair, I'm going to harden your hearts so that you won't receive my mercy.'"

Now loved ones, you know that that kind of idea wriggles inside us when we read this verse. Most of us who think there is something wrong with it feel that we can't explain it, but yet we wonder: is there some fatalism in Christianity? We know we are free, but aren't there some verses that kind of suggest that God is actually doing the whole thing?

Now brothers and sisters, do you see that either we are free or we are not free? Either God has given us free will or else he is in charge of the whole operation and is treating us as robot prisoners. I would point out to you that the whole purpose of Jesus' death is because God wanted it to preserve our free wills, so that he would have friends that loved him because they wanted to, not robot prisoners who loved him because they couldn't do anything else. The whole thrust of the Bible is concerned with God preserving our free will. You must see that if this verse really means that God hardens some of our hearts so that we will reject his mercy, and he softens other's hearts so that we will receive his mercy, it makes foolishness out of Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem.

If Jesus was weeping over Jerusalem and saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" and in his own heart he knew fine well God has forced Jerusalem to refuse Jesus, then do you see that Jesus would be a hypocrite? He would not be the greatest moral teacher of the purest man that ever lived. He would be an absolute hypocrite. He would be pretending that Jerusalem had free will to reject him and that's what they were doing, when in his own heart He knew that they hadn't free will to reject him.

Do you see that you can't have both and? It has to be either one or the other. I put that to you because don't you agree that there has been a strong emphasis of Calvinism and predestination among all of us in Christendom, and many of us have a sneaking feeling that we are free, but we are not free? I think that is what keeps many of us from victory and from the strong proclamation "I can do all things in him [Christ] who strengthens me." [Philippians 4:13] Many of you make the effort and commit yourselves onto the cross with Jesus, but in the very back of your minds is the feeling, "Yes, but doesn't God harden the hearts of whomever he wills, and he has mercy on whomever he wills"?

If that is not what the verse means, what does it mean? Briefly, God has mercy on whomever he wills, which is everybody, because there is another verse in Scripture that says it is not his will that any should perish. So, the verse means first of all that God has mercy on everybody. He extends his mercy to all of us who have ever lived in his world.

Then the second part of the verse means that God hardens the conscience of those of us who reject his mercy. He has mercy on all of us and he hardens the conscience of those who reject the mercy he has towards us. God is not keeping any of us out of heaven. He is opening the door to us, but only those can go in who want to go in and who go in through the door. Those of us who don't, God hardens our consciences as we reject his mercy.

That is precisely and with great detail illustrated in the historical record of Pharaoh king of

Egypt, in Exodus 5:1: "Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.' But Pharaoh said, 'Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.'" Yet God had mercy on Pharaoh. He sent Moses and Aaron back to plead with him that he would do what God wanted. But Pharaoh hardened his own will; he hardened his heart---in the sense of his will--against God and said no, I won't let these people go. They were cheap labor for him; he wanted them. Then God had further mercy on Pharaoh in that he wanted to be sure that Pharaoh knew that he was dealing with the Creator of the whole universe.

So, you remember, God sent great supernatural plagues upon Egypt. He filled all the rivers with blood and told Pharaoh that this would happen. Then when Pharaoh hardened his will again he sent a plague of frogs throughout the whole land so that Pharaoh could not doubt that this was the Creator of the universe that he was dealing with. God sent plague after plague in his mercy to show Pharaoh that he was dealing with the Maker of the universe--not some local mythological being, but the Creator who had made him. God continually extended his mercy to Pharaoh and Pharaoh repeatedly--ten times, if you follow the historical record -- ten times Pharaoh hardened his heart of his own volition. He rejected God's mercy.

Now it is only after the first five plagues were over that you read of God then taking part in the hardening. Actually the hardening there is not even concerned with the conscience. It is, in fact, concerned with strengthening Pharaoh's will, strengthening his courage to do what his will wanted to do. Exodus 9:34: "But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had eased, he sinned yet again, and hardened his heart, he and his servants. So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he did not let the people of Israel go; as the Lord had spoken through Moses." Only then when God sees that Pharaoh is determined to reject him does he go on in chapter 10:1, "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them.'" The word is the Hebrew word "qasach" which means 'strengthened'. It isn't the word that means "hardened" in the sense of "made stubborn". That is what Pharaoh did each time--he made his will stubborn. God here strengthened him with courage to do what he wanted to do anyway, so that he was outwardly what he was inwardly. It is in that sense that God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart.

The one other time where God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart is in Exodus 4:21 at the very beginning of the whole series of events. God looks at Pharaoh and has foreknowledge. God can foresee what we will do but he doesn't make us do it. It is important to see that. Foreknowledge is not foreordination. You can foresee what your little son will do, but that doesn't make him do it. So there is a difference between foreknowledge and foreordination. God looked forward and he saw into Pharaoh's heart the way many of us can do even with each other, and he foresaw that Pharaoh would again and again reject his will for him. "And the Lord said to Moses, 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.'" For the first five plagues, Pharaoh hardened his own will; then in the latter five plagues this prophecy was actually proved true. In the latter five plagues God then began to harden Pharaoh's conscience so that he became more and more insensitive.

That is what happens to us. David was on the roof of the palace. It was a beautiful afternoon and he looked down and saw a beautiful woman bathing. God's spirit within him rose up to the Father to thank him for all this beauty. But David's own spirit sank as his emotions became preoccupied with the satisfaction and the exhilaration he could get from this woman quite apart from his Maker and his Creator's wishes. So he looked a second time. God showed him mercy and convicted him and made

him hesitate, but he hardened his own will and actually sent his servants over to the woman's house to find out who she was. Again God had mercy upon him and convicted him of his sin because the report came back that she was married--she was someone else's wife. Not only was she someone's wife, but she was the wife of one of his leading soldiers, Uriah. [2 Samuel 11:3]

Yet again David hardened his will against God's clear conviction. He had intercourse with the woman, and yet again God showed his mercy. It was obvious to David that the woman was at the time of her month when no Jews should have any kind of intercourse with one another. God stopped him in his tracks again and convicted him. But David ignored the conviction and hardened his own will. You remember they had a son, and the son eventually died. God, of course, convicted David plainly and bluntly when the son was born. David hardened his own will yet again, and then God withdrew his softening grace from his conscience and all hell was then free to break loose. And that is what happened. David sent for his general and arranged that Uriah, the husband, would be put in the forefront of the fighting so that he would be killed. That is exactly what happened. David lost all sense of conscience and he murdered this man. What started off as too long a look, ended up as murder and a rebuke from God sent to David through Nathan the prophet.

What about us? Is it not true that you and I like to believe the serpent's words? When Eve said, "God says if I eat of the tree I will die? The serpent said, "You shall not die." Are we not like that? Do we not think that we can control our sense of God's presence in our life whatever we do? Do we not have a kind of managing attitude towards our own spiritual experience whereby we think "No, no, I know what God's approval is; I know what his forgiveness is, and I can maintain that? I can control and maintain that sense of his approval in my life whatever I do."

In other words, we think we can harden our own wills against God and do what we want, and yet somehow our consciences will remain soft and our spirits sensitive to him. You know it is not so. You know that every time you are harsh with your wife, every time you have been critical of a roommate, every time you have moved out into unclean thinking, it has been a little easier to do it the next time. It has been a little less difficult to do what you know is wrong. It has been a little harder to be sensitive to the other person as you used to be. It has been a little harder to be convinced that the thing is as wrong as you used to think it was. Isn't that true? Every time we harden our wills against God, there are spiritual laws inside us that enable him to harden our consciences. So that, brothers and sisters, we become a bit harder; we become a bit more insensitive to each other; we become a little less sensitive to God's presence. We have more and more difficulty sensing that he approves of us and that we are forgiven.

You see, the truth is you do not have control over your conscience. You cannot keep your conscience clean by manipulating it through thought control. The only one who can keep your conscience clean is God, if you obey your conscience. If you disobey your conscience even in the little things, your conscience automatically becomes unclean. Your sense of God's forgiveness and your sense of God's approval in your life and your sense of God's presence in your life disappears. God has set it up that way. You can't control your sensitivity to your wife. You can't control your sensitivity to other people. You can't control your sensitivity to God. All you can control is your will. As you control your will so God controls. Your conscience, softens your spirit, gives you a sensitivity to himself, and a sensitivity to others.

That is what that verse says. God gives his mercy to whomever he will, to all of us here. Those of us who reject that mercy by disobeying him and by hardening our will against the things that he shows us we should do, our hearts he hardens. You can't escape it. It is a rule, a spiritual law. I

have found myself under it in my own life. You cannot change that law. The only thing that you and I can change is our wills. God has control of the sensitivity and the softness of our spirits and the cleanness of our consciences. Those are affected directly by whether we submit our wills to him or not.

What I would ask you to do is look over some of the things you have known for years are wrong in your life? Do you find it easier to do them now than when you first started it? If you do, there is a hard lump beginning to develop inside your spirit, a cancer that eventually even the power of God's Spirit will not be able to touch. Have you such an area in your life? Loved ones, I tell you, submit your will now before it is too late. Obey now before you are no longer able to sense you should obey. Change today. I think especially of some of you who have been under habits for years and you know they are not right. Loved ones, it doesn't matter whether you fall tomorrow or not, that isn't the issue. God looks down on a heart that continually tries and continually moves towards him. But the heart that has settled down and decided, "No, I can't do anything about it, that's the kind of person I am"-- that heart is already becoming so hard that God's Spirit in a few years will not be able to touch it at all. So I'd say to you and myself as well, if there is any area of your lives where we have become hard because we have been resisting God's will for so long, will you join me now and tell God that you are determined? Tell God no matter how many times we fall in the process over the next weeks; we are determined to begin moving back into his will about this thing. You are determined to stop doing it. Stop doing whatever it is. I don't care if you have stopped smoking a thousand times. Stop doing whatever it is. Smoking is nothing. It is the harshness and the criticism, the envy and the jealousy, the unclean thoughts and the sarcasm. Those are the things that mean that our conscience is getting harder and harder. So will you? I'm going to deal with that myself. I would ask you to deal with it.

Let us pray.

Lord, God, thank for showing us there is nothing mysterious about this verse of Scripture that it is a fact that you extend your mercy to whomever you will, i.e. all of us because you so loved the world that you gave your only begotten Son that any of us who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life. So, Lord, thank you that you extend your mercy to all of us but you harden the consciences of those who reject your mercy.

Lord, we have seen some areas of our own lives where our consciences have become hard and seared. There are some things, Lord, that we have got so used to doing that we no longer think of them as sins. There are things that we have rationalized about ourselves that our mothers or fathers would never have dreamed of. Lord, even things we would never have dreamed of ourselves in our early days. Lord, we see there is an insensitivity there which we cannot control. Lord, there is a lack of love in us toward our loved ones that we can never explain but we see it. It is you that has hardened our spirits as we have hardened our wills. Lord, we ask you to break up our fallow ground -- to begin to break up these hard spirits of ours. Break up these seared consciences because Lord we intend to return to your way for us. Lord, we resolve this day to begin to obey you in this area of our lives which you have been pointing out to us for so long, whatever the cost, Lord, and however long we have to get up and try again. We are going to move against this. We ask you to begin to soften our consciences and spirits and restore unto us the joy of our salvation. [Psalm 51:12] All this so we may worship you with a free spirit. We ask this in Jesus' name and for the glory of a dear Father who has given us free wills and freedom to do what he tells us and grace to obey.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with today and throughout this week. Amen.