

Accepting God's Judgment

Romans 9:21

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Let's discuss the topic: accepting God's judgment. Let's do it in connection with Romans 9:21: "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" Do you know that all of us here have the same negative response to that verse? We really have. The reason is, even we Westerners, have allowed our minds to be darkened and prejudiced by the great same lie that has virtually paralyzed the Eastern hemisphere. We have a negative response to this verse and any idea of the potter having the right to do anything with the clay, thinking of our Maker as the potter and we as the clay, because our whole way of thinking is shot through with the same great lie about Providence that has virtually paralyzed life in the Eastern hemisphere. We have touched on this lie before, loved ones. I think it is important to bring it up again because we all lie under it. The lie is encapsulated in a little French song that was written about fifteen years ago. It goes, "Que sera, sera. Whatever will be will be. The future's not ours to see. Que sera, sera." It is that belief that the Eastern religions encourage, that our lives are ruled by FATE. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen, and we can't do anything about it.

With us, during the past ten or fifteen years, it was expressed in psychological determinism. That was the theory that our heredity and environment don't simply influence what we are but utterly dictate what we are. That was our version of fatalism. Fatalism in the East is the belief that our lives are governed by impersonal forces so that we cannot exercise our free will against them, and what we are is just due to those impersonal forces and their activity. We express that in psychological determinism but it was the same theory. It was the same lie that our heredity and environment does not simply influence what we are but utterly dictates what we are, so that we are incapable of exercising our free wills.

Now psychology is moving to a much more existential kind of attitude to life and so we are not so dominated by psychological determinism but we have just shifted this belief in fate over to another subject. That explains our preoccupation with the stars and astrology. The incredible popularity of horoscopes in our newspapers is the old belief that our lives are governed by some obscure impersonal forces beyond this world and we can only lie at their feet and suffer what they do to us. Many of us in our society are almost utterly dominated by what signs we were born under. It is the same belief in fate.

I would discourage any of you from playing around with astrology. Some of you play around with it; you read your horoscopes for fun. We don't realize that it can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy in us if we give it any time of day in our lives. The greatest human attribute that our Creator has given us, our free will, is being again stolen from us. This time not by psychology, but by astrology. The right to exercise our free will is the most precious human attribute that we have.

Now it is because we are so brainwashed with the lie that our lives are in the hands of impersonal fate and great forces against which we can do nothing, that we have such a negative response to this verse. We don't hear this verse as God really spoke it through Paul. We hear it through our prejudiced, darkened minds that have been brainwashed with this lie about Providence and fate. We see this verse saying we are the clay. We think of clay as a kind of sticky mess, an inanimate object that lies there; the potter does all the working and the clay does nothing. It has no will to

exercise, it just lies there and allows itself to be manipulated by the potter. We ourselves tend to read the verse as: "Whatever happens to the clay is due only, absolutely, and solely to the potter." We translate it into our own lives as: "Whatever happens to my life--what job I do, what vocation I follow, what even happens to me in regard to my eternal destiny--is due utterly, absolutely and solely to what the Maker wants to do, and I have nothing to say in the whole business." We get a little depressed when we think that, don't we? That's why we have a negative response to this: it saddens us a little when we see a verse like this, and this is why we shy back from it. Something in us says this isn't right.

Loved ones, that is your conscience. All of us have sufficient of the image of God remaining in us, (however much of the image of God we have wiped out of our lives) in our conscience so that there is some sense in us of "This isn't right. I'm not just clay that is lying there inanimate, that can't do anything and can't influence its own future. I'm not just in the hands of some mighty Maker who can do what he wants with me. I'm not in the hands of some impersonal force." We need to see this as an indication that maybe this isn't the right interpretation of the verse.

What is the correct interpretation? When Paul wrote this verse he knew that every Hebrew to whom he was speaking, every Jew, would turn his mind back to Jeremiah, the prophet who originally used this image of the potter and the clay. Jeremiah 18:1: "The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord; 'Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.' So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do." Jeremiah knew that no parable can be applied in every detail. Our minds are not so great that they can find physical instances that in every detail illustrate an intellectual truth. Jeremiah knew that, so he gave the truth that God showed. Verse 5: "Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?' says the Lord. 'Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do.'"

So God says you are not clay that has nothing to do with what's going to be made out of you. You determine what he can do. God says the potter is actually limited by the kind of clay that he has to work with. A potter works at his wheel. If he finds a little hard particle of clay developing, then it can spoil the whole vessel that he was planning to make. Or, if there is a little soft spot in the clay, he has to start all over again and re-work and re-plan the vessel that he was making. He is utterly dependent on the kind of clay that he is working with, and so the response of the clay to the working of his hands determines what he can do with that clay. That is what God told us through Jeremiah. When Jews or Hebrews read this verse in Romans they wouldn't think of clay as just some inanimate object that had no influence over its own future. They would think of the clay as being the limiting and the guiding factor as to what the potter could do with it. It is vital that the clay responds as the potter wants. So you find in verse 8: "And if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it." So whether the clay he's working with turns from its evil ways, the potter will change what he was going to do to it. Verse 9 says, "And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice then I will repent of the good which I intended to do to it." Whether God intends to use the nation for one purpose or another, he has to adjust that purpose to the way the nation responds.

You and I are the same. God is saying, "I have plans for all of you, but I can only do it if you are willing. I can't do it if you are unwilling. I am like a potter. I look at you and try to find what substance you are really made of, what you are really like; what you are yourself, in the heart of your being and substance. I see deep down into your heart, and depending on how you respond to my overall purpose for you, my ability to do certain things with your life is determined and is either limited or enlarged. It depends utterly on your response to my overall purpose for your life. My overall purpose for your life is that you will become like me and like my Son. "

Then what attitude should you take to your vocation? The truth really is, forget what attitude you are to take to that, because actually that is none of your business. This verse says, "Has the potter not a right over the clay, to make of it a vessel for beauty or a vessel for menial use?" So that is God's business, not your business. Your business is not to work out what you are going to do with your life, because it is not you that is going to do anything with your life. Your dear Maker has in mind a certain purpose for you, knows it and has it organized, and he will bring you into that. He alone will mold you. He will mold you like clay and fit you for that purpose. The last thing you have to do is think and worry and work out what attitude you are going to take to your vocation. God expects you to leave that to him.

You may say, "What do I have to do then?" Actually, it is easy to answer that. Find out who you are; find out what kind of clay you are. Find out what your substance is, because that is going to determine what he does with your life. Find out the heart of your substance, find out why you live. God is looking at you now and he is looking for one quality in you. Not ability with math, not a degree in history, not a training in engineering. He is looking at you at this moment and he is looking at one quality in you. Do you want to be like him above every other want in your life? God is looking into the very heart of you. He kneads you like dough. He allows circumstances to press in upon you and he kneads you, working you with his hands to find out what kind of substance you are. He is looking at your responses to find out why you are alive. He is looking at you to see if you are accepting the purpose for which he made you.

I would like to point out that purpose in the Bible so that we nail it down plainly. Romans 8:28: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." What is his purpose? "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren." God made you so that during this life you would become like his Son and you would be at home with him and his Son in love and peace forever. That is why it says in Genesis, "Let us make man in our image." God looks at you to see what you are living for.

Could you answer that yourselves, privately? What are you living for? What is the dearest thing in your whole life? Because really, that is what is limiting God doing in you what he wants. He wants you to live every moment to be like him; to become the kind of person that is pleasing to him; to be the kind of person that he would be at home with. Do you live like that?

The only human relationship that I know that would illustrate it for us all is you and I and our first boyfriend or girlfriend. Turn your mind back to that. Suddenly your mom saw this scrappy, scruffy, dirty little guy combing his hair, and she couldn't understand. He has never combed his hair before! He has his own comb and he stands in front of the mirror combing his hair madly. Then she finds that he is using some of his dad's cologne. Suddenly we find ourselves interested in what this girlfriend or boyfriend thinks of us. We find our own thinking becoming preoccupied with "Do they like me, do they like me in this coat, do they like me in these shoes, and do they like me with my hair like that?" Suddenly our whole lives become dominated by the desire to be the kind of person

that this girl or guy would like. Probably most of us have had some experience with that, either a boyfriend or girlfriend, or a teacher that we respected or some authority figure.

That is what God is looking for. Are you living like that? Or when you find yourself pressured by circumstances, does your love of money come out? Do you care most about the money? You really have to be very straight about it. Do you care most about money or do you care most about your car, or when you find yourself pressured by difficulties in life, do you find that what rises to the top is the desire to preserve yourself, to save yourself from hurt, from pain? For your vocation, all you can do is determine what matters most in your life because depending on how close that is to God's purpose for you -- to make you like himself -- or how far away that is, your vocation is going to be throughout your whole life continually either an enigma and an uncertainty to you, or a beautiful unfolding of God's purpose for you. Or it is going to be what is worst of all, the second-best that the potter had to devise in the light of your own response. That's true. That's it.

Really, brothers and sisters, our Creator is looking at you to see what you are really living your life for and depending on that, if you're living it for money -- really you don't give him much opportunity. He just has to go with what the clay can be molded into. If you're living for your own success, the Father is a dear God -- He has the power to break our free wills, but he refuses. The Israelites said they wanted a king. He knew a king would be bad for them, but he eventually said, -Okay they would have a king. Of course, the kings were a disaster, except for just one. So it is with us. God looks into the heart of what you are and finds out what you really want in life. It is very interesting, but you are probably getting exactly that. Even those of us who are miserable failures--you probably get exactly what you want.

So our dear God looks down upon us and asks, "Are you living for the overall purpose for which I made you for? These things are all going to pass, but my Son and I will be alive forever and they want you to join them and be part of their fellowship and family. Will you live to become the kind of person that will be happy with us, or do you want to give your life to this wood or steel or electricity that is going to pass in a matter of years?"

So what attitude should you take to your own vocation? Really, it is true; forget it, just forget all that silly business of trying to work out what you are going to be or what you are going to do. That is God's business. He is day by day molding you into the vessel that he wants you to be. All you have to do is continue to work on finding out what you really are, what you want out of life--and deal with yourself. Are you going to come to heel with God? Are you going to at last accept the purpose for which he made you, to be like himself; or are you going to foul up and frustrate his whole plan for your life by going after something less?

Some of us may say, "What do you want us to do, sit around with social security and meditate until that moment comes?" No. It is plain, loved ones, in Ecclesiastes 9:10: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might." That is what God expects. He expects you to rest in the assurance that he is molding you through your present abilities, through your present opportunities, through your present experiences and through the revelations that he is giving you day by day; that he is molding you into the vessel that he wants for the purpose for which He created you. You rest in that assurance and whatever your hand finds to do, whatever needs to be done, whatever your abilities take you into at this time, do it with all your might. That is the greatest expression of faith in the Father as a potter who has molded you as clay that you could ever give.

If I could encourage you who are probably like myself at college -- Stop fretting and the anxious

thinking and the manic interviewing. Stop it. By all means go to some interviews, as God guides you. But stop this attitude that unless you can think and project your life twenty years into the future you are lost. We end up spending twenty percent of our energy doing our present job or studies, and about thirty percent in the past worrying about the mistakes we have made. The other fifty percent, as C.S. Lewis said, we spend in the future trying to work out impossibilities.

Inflation may blow the whole thing up, somebody may pull out the plug and America may sink. We don't know; nobody knows what will be ten years hence except one dear Person, and he is your Father and he knows that you will be around at that time. You don't know what will happen but he has a special plan for you at that time. Stop wasting your time trying to think it out. I think most of you moms and dads would back me on this that too many of us worry about the future, trying to work out what we are going to do, instead of giving ourselves to the present. Give yourself to the present with all your heart. Live freely and magnificently in the present with a great assurance that your dear Father is molding you. Every experience, every time you make a mistake on the typewriter, every time you make a mistake in the calculations, your Father is working with you, molding you into the vessel he is going to use.

That is so good, because it means everything good or bad is being worked into the plan that he has for you. That is what he wants you to do. Let him decide whether you are going to be for beauty or whether you are going to be for menial use. That is God's business. Stop worrying whether you are going to have a job that your peers will think is good or approve of. Stop thinking whether you are going to be the kind of person that society will praise or look up to or that society will ignore or despise. Stop thinking whether you are going to get the kind of job your parents will like or dislike. Stop that. That isn't up to you to decide. It isn't their right to decide.

The dear Creator has a plan for you and if that plan is to wash out restrooms, that is God's perfect will for you. If that plan is to be the director of some company, then that is God's perfect plan for you. But he asks you to accept it with joy, because he is planning not for this present world. This thing is going to blow up, loved ones, in such a short time, in terms of geological years, and God is planning for the new world that will begin after this one is gone. He is preparing you for that world and he is using your vocation to do that. What he is asking you to do is to establish what kind of clay you are. That is your place and that will determine what He can make of you. What are you living for?

Let us pray.

Father we'd try to answer that question here privately this morning. What are we living for? What is the ruling passion of our lives? What is the overriding concern that comes up again and again when we are lying quietly before we go to sleep. What comes out when we are pressured? What do we rush to save when we are in danger? Lord, by your Spirit of truth enable us to answer that question and to see that until we come to your answer -- to be like you and to please you so that we can live with you forever--until we come to that answer, we're simply hindering and limiting what you can do with our lives. We are losing our life and preoccupation on lesser purposes, instead of fixing the one great purpose and allowing you to establish the lesser temporal ones for us.

Lord, I pray you would help each brother and sister here this morning to settle finally what their life is about and what they are living for. I pray you will deliver them from this frantic preoccupation with what job they will be doing or what their vocation is going to be. You, and only you will allow them to rest in the fact -- has not the potter the right over the clay to make one

lump a vessel of beauty and the other lump a vessel for menial use. Lord, we don't care whether we are a door keeper in your house or the leader of angelic choir as long as it is part of what you want us to be and as long as we please you.

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