

Right With God or Right?

Romans 9:31

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Why are some people who claim to be Christians uptight, petty, small-minded, mean and miserly? While there are other people in the world who don't make any such claims and are kind of happy-go-lucky, mellow, relaxed, generous, magnanimous and just easy-going, why?

I had a lot of intellectual difficulties, before I accepted the Christian explanation of reality, but probably none troubled me more than that fact. That I knew lots of people who claim to be Christians, who were among the most unpleasant customers I had ever met in my life. They were small-minded and they were petty and they were sectarian. They were opinionated and they were critical and they were simply unhappy people. But I had many friends who were just dear old happy-go-lucky pagans, who were fun to be with. And really I would far rather have been with them than with these other people who call themselves Christians.

Now why is that? Because I am sure you've thought the same thing at times. Well, the noble pagan has always been with us. Do you see that? The noble pagan has been here from the earliest days on earth. A person can be generous or can be mellow or relaxed or easy-going or kindly even, simply because their father was like that, really.

It's possible for a person to be apparently good, simply because their parents were like that and they caught that from their parents. Or, it's possible for many people -- and I notice this in Britain a lot-- it's possible for many people to have the intellect to work out that this is the healthiest way to live. Or, that the human organism operates best when you're kind or generous or you're not anxious or you're not uptight. So, there are many noble pagans who have been able to work that out and yet they don't believe in the Maker at all, let alone love him or trust him.

In other words, all of us have the remains of God's image in us and we have enough of that image left in us to be able to produce a winsome personality even though we ourselves do not actually believe in God or love Him or trust Him. Really, that's just a fact, loved ones. There are just lots of nice people around who don't believe in God at all, don't love him, don't acknowledge him.

What about the unpleasant Christians? Well, honestly most of them are probably not children of God at all, probably. Probably, they aren't, and I know you say to me, "Oh, but there are so many like that, these so-called Christians that aren't pleasant people at all, how do they come to be like that?" or, "Where do they go wrong?" Well, they go wrong in the same place as the Jews. So let's look at where they went wrong. It's Romans 9:31.

Romans 9:31, "But that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law." That's actually the short answer. People who call themselves Christians or claim to be children of God and just aren't nice are usually people who are pursuing a righteousness that is based on law. So, will you start back with me at God's plan?

Our Creator is really a dear person. You'd really enjoy being with them, really. He is a dear loving person. You can see that with all the things that he has given us and you can see it with the sunshine glinting on the water of a lake, you can see it in the leaves turning in the fall and their

colors.

You can see it in these fingers that he has given us, you know. And this face he's given us and all the things that money couldn't buy. He is a dear loving person, that's why he has given us all these things because he wants us to enjoy the same love and the same life that He and his Son have. That's his plan and you know, the basis of any developing love relationship is trust and that's all He asks of us actually.

He is just asking that we are grateful to him for all that he has given to us. He's asking that we are grateful for our continued existence in this world and that we trust him day-by-day. We live in trust of him, that we trust him moment-by-moment for the things that we need. In that way, we'll develop in our relationship with him and that's God's plan. That's exactly, you know, what he revealed to the Jews, if you would like to look at it for a moment in Genesis 15. He made himself visible to one of the fathers of the race, in Genesis 15, it's recorded and he explained just that to him.

Genesis 15:5, He showed himself to Abraham, "And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And Abraham, he believed the Lord; and he, God, reckoned it to him as righteousness." So that's God's attitude to us.

He says, "Look, together we'll people this earth and trust me that I have put you here to do a certain work in it that will bring the world under my control and in the process of doing that work, you, yourself, will become more like me and will come more and more into an intimate love with each other and I, myself, will take care of all your material needs. I'll give you what you need so just trust me and let's move forward in trust together", and that's what our dear Creator says to you this morning and to me.

Now what happened was that some men and women resented that dependent relationship. They resented having to depend on God like that and they determined, we'll work the earth and develop it so that we can depend on it and ourselves and not on God. Of course, what happened was, tremendous trauma came into their lives and tremendous strain. Because the secret is that the natural world yields easily to men and women who work it in a relaxed faith in their Father to bring it under his will, but to men and women who work the earth and work each other so that they can depend on themselves, the earth brings forth thorns and thistles. It does not yield easily.

You end up with San Andreas faults. You end up with oil spills in the oceans and so tremendous strain began to come into the lives of all of us men and women, as we began to work the earth, not in a relaxed faith and trust in God as our loving Father, but we began to work it as an alternative source of the personal contentment that we were meant to get from our relationship of trust in Him. The amazing thing is that we began to do that so much over the centuries, that we forgot that there was any other way to live. We began to get used to working the earth for our own purposes and we began to get used to living here without any idea that there was a dear loving Father who controlled the whole thing.

So we began to grow into fear because of things that happened that we could not understand -- and so much so that this became the norm -- that we couldn't even remember when it was different. It was then that God again revealed himself to these dear old Jews and he said to them, "Look, let me describe the kind of life you'd live if you trusted me as your dear Father day-by-day and relaxed in

me and did just what I want you to do on the earth and stop living independent of me. Listen, if you did that, if you trusted me as your loving Father", well, I'll show you what He said. It's Exodus 20.

Exodus 20:3, He said, "If you trust me as your loving father day-by-day, you love no other Gods before me because you know that I am your God. If you trust me as your dear Father instead of treating me as some deistic kind of being, far removed from the earth, you'll not make yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above."

"If you trust me you won't take my name in vain, you'll love me. You'll think of me as a dear dad. It would be like cursing your own dad to curse me. You'll remember the Sabbath day to set it apart from me. You'll honor your father and mother if you trust me. If you trust me, you won't kill, you'll have no need to kill because you'll know that I am in control of your life and that you don't need to do anything that would bring violence into my world."

"You won't commit adultery because you'll get full satisfaction from your relationship of intimacy with me and you won't need the thrill and excitement and the exhilaration of a relationship with another person. You won't steal because you'll know that I'll provide all that you need and what I haven't provided, you'll trust me that you don't need and that you'll be able to do without it. You won't bear false witness against your neighbor because you won't be out to defend your own reputation, you'll trust me that I'll take care of it", and that was what God said to the Jews.

In other words what He said was, "Look, these are the laws of a trusting life, just the same way as we talk about the law of gravity. The law of gravity is that if I drop the Bible, it'll fall to the ground. I don't need to say, "Bible, fall to the ground! Fall to the ground!" You don't need to say that. The law of gravity is a description of the way heavier than air objects behave on our earth."

So God said, "I want to give you the laws of a life that is lived in trust of me. Here they are. This is the kind of life. Now, do you see if you're not living this way, you'll know you're not trusting me." And, so, in the midst of a mass of people like ourselves who had forgotten even how we should live, God came with this clear description. He said, "You want to know if you trust me or not? Here you can tell."

It was like Him saying, "You want to know if you have measles or not? Okay, if you have red spots all over your skin, you have measles. You want to know if you trust me or not? All right, if you don't covet, it means you're trusting me. You're in the right relationship with me and that I count as righteousness. I count that faith that you have in me as right. It's the right relationship between a God and his creature." That's how you know and that was why God gave us these laws, loved ones.

Now do you know what the Jews did? It was as if they got a knife and started to try to scrape the red spots off their skin. It really was. It was as if they said, "Here are the symptoms of this disease, I haven't got it. I haven't got it. I haven't got it. I'll scrape off the symptoms to prove that I haven't got it", and of course, the disease was rampant inside them. They were utterly distrustful of God. They weren't trusting at all and the symptoms were there. They coveted and they stole but they determined, "We'll remove these symptoms. We'll remove them by concentrating on avoiding them."

Not, of course, by the natural automatic trust in our Father, but by our own determined independent

efforts. And, of course, God was trying to save them, "Stop, stop, stop My children! Those things are given to you to show you the area of your life where you're not trusting me yet. Now, the way to have that removed from your life is to trust me more in that area, not to begin to put your full concentration on this law and on obeying it. Don't do that. That's not why I gave it to you."

"I gave it to you to express to you that you weren't trusting me and what I want you to do is to come close to me and trust me as your dear Father in this area where this symptom has appeared. Because every transgression of my Commandments is not just a red spot on your skin, but it's a sign of your independence of me. Then, now if you by your own independent effort and obedience, try to get rid of those symptoms of your independence, you're simply compounding your independence." That was what the Father had in mind, loved ones, when he gave us these laws.

But you know the dear old Jews just went straight ahead and they concentrated on trying to reproduce the symptoms of a trusting life without actually trusting God. Now that's law righteousness. That's the righteousness that is based on law. Faith righteousness, you see, is trusting your Father and the life that comes from that trust, that flows from it automatically, but law righteousness is attempting to reproduce the symptoms of a trusting life without actually trusting, by your own independent efforts.

Now that's what produces petty, uptight, self-righteous Christians who trust in themselves. They produce not a beautiful life that reminds you of Jesus but they produce a self-righteous life that chugs along in such a self-conscious manner that everybody is put off and offended by it. Because you see the truth is that our habit of trusting in ourselves has produced in us, a twist, a radical perversion in our personalities so that now as we are, we cannot trust God. You've noticed that yourself, haven't you?

You just want to trust him for your reputation but you can't. You want to trust in God's love for your self-worth but somehow you never seem to get as much self-worth that way as trusting the respect of your peers. You want to trust God for the sense of intimacy that you get from other human relationships but somehow you can't.

There's a perversion in your personality that has made your emotions so subject and so enslaved to the appetites of your body that you cannot get the same exhilaration and satisfaction from an intimate relationship with God that you can get from an intimate relationship with another human being.

In other words, our personalities have become radically twisted and perverted by this habit of trusting in ourselves. That's why Jesus died. God took your radically perverted personality, put it into His Son, put an end to the old creation and recreated a new version of you that is able to trust God. But, of course that version of you can only be made real in this physical world if you see that your distrust of God is you, yourself.

Loved ones, it's not just a little symptom inside you. It's you, it's you, great big god, thinking that you can do it on your own. First you have to see that the distrust that you have towards your Father, even in little things, is an integral part of you that only God can change. And, secondly, you have to be willing to die with Jesus to everything but God, your Father as a source for your life.

The miracle is that if you're willing to do that, if you're willing to identify yourself with Jesus

in his death to himself, to other people, to other things, to everything but his Father as the one who will sustain him, then the Spirit of Jesus and his trust will come into your personality and you'll find yourself able to trust God. You'll find yourself able to trust him day-by-day.

There'll be a change wrought in your heart by your identification with Jesus in His death. In fact, that was the whole plan that God had, if you'd like to look at it, there's a verse that says that, loved ones, back in Romans 8:3, points out that the whole purpose of Jesus' death was so that that distrusting personality of ours could be destroyed and recreated so that we would in fact begin to live the way God wanted us to.

Romans 8:3, "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh", that is that independence and distrust, "in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit".

So, God sent Jesus to die for us so that we might end up fulfilling the law by our trust in him and that is God's plan. But there are plenty of bitter, old petty, self-righteous Christians who don't see Jesus' death that way at all, they don't. They don't see Jesus' death as an experience whereby their distrusting personality can be destroyed and completely recreated in a version that is able to trust God. And, therefore is able to fulfill the laws of this life. They see the death of Jesus as some kind of bribe that is offered to God, to cover up their failure to live according to His laws.

So there is a complete misinterpretation of the law, you know. There's a complete misinterpretation of what the laws are for, complete misinterpretation of what Jesus' death is for. So, instead of entering into an all embarrassing identification with Jesus in His death, they used the death as an excuse for continuing to have the symptoms in their life of disease. You can see how ridiculous it is.

So there are many Christians who use the death of Jesus as a kind of mantra, really. It's not far from the old TM. It's not far from the old eastern religions. They use Jesus' death as a kind of mantra. They say, "Well, we know that if you trust God, you shouldn't covet and you shouldn't steal but I do covet and I do steal, but I won't admit that it's because I don't trust God. No, but I do believe that if I mutter "for God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son that 'whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life", if I mutter that and if I believe that mantra, then somehow God will overlook the fact that I have these symptoms of disease in me." Loved ones, it is so ridiculous. It is so silly.

Our dear Father is lovingly saying to us, "Look, My child, you have a disease of distrust of me that will prevent you and I living together forever. Now look, if you want to know where that disease is, here, you see, you're coveting, that means you're not trusting me for your material possessions. Now, don't concentrate on that coveting, concentrate and trust in me and that coveting symptom will disappear." But instead so many Christians come before God and say, "Well, we know we covet but after all you can't be perfect. So I believe Jesus' death is a bribe to you to overlook the fact that we're coveting."

Well, it makes no sense to our dear Father. It's like saying to our dear Father, "Look, I know I have the disease, but Jesus' death is a bribe to you, not to look at the symptoms of the disease. Pretend I don't have it, pretend I don't have it." Loved ones, it's meaningless and of course what it does is, it produces Christians who are always trying to prove that the symptoms of disease are

not in them - so they become preoccupied with right and wrong, with good and evil, that's it.

They become preoccupied with not doing this or not doing that or doing this or doing that. They become preoccupied with being right rather than with being right with God. Of course, the tragedy is that they call this freedom from the law. They say we're free from the law. In reality, if they listen to their friends they'd hear what they were free from. Their friends and colleagues and their relatives who have to live with them would say they're free from righteousness. That's what they're free from.

Their lives have nothing of the righteousness of Jesus in them and, loved ones, the truth is, you're freed from the law when you have died with Jesus to every source for what you need but God and then the law no longer convicts your life, it describes your life. That's freedom from the law.

When you find yourselves no longer opposing or resisting this description of the trusting life that is given in the Ten Commandments and that is elaborated on by Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount, when you find that describes your life and you find yourself no longer opposing or resisting that law, there, you are free from the law and you're living freed from it. You're not living an enslavement trying to obey something that doesn't come naturally to you.

So loved ones, do you see that whenever the law speaks to you and convicts you of something in your life that is wrong, don't start trying to scrape off that spot, don't. You'll end up one of those so-called Christians who are self-righteous, preoccupied all the time with right and wrong and filled with prejudices, uptight -- and have personalities that aren't in the least winsome.

Rather say, "Lord, thank You. Thank You that You've shown me that there's this symptom of distrust in my life, thank You for that Lord. I don't want to prove that it isn't there, I thank You. You've shown it to me. My conscience convicts me. Now Holy Spirit, show me in what way I have not died with Jesus to everybody, and everything, but God as my Father. Show me that." Of course there's the great verse that describes it all better than I have said it.

When you come into that trust in your dear Father as your own Father day-by-day, then his Spirit and the Spirit of his Son comes into you and the fruit of the Spirit is borne in your life. (Galatians 5:22) That's love and joy and peace and you'll find yourself filled with long-suffering and gentleness and goodness and faith and meekness and temperance. Then the great words, "...against such, there is no law", that's freedom from the law, and loved ones, that's the way God wants us to live.

So I can understand some of you this morning having the same problem as me, thinking that faith in Christ is intellectual belief in some kind of mantra called John 3:16. It isn't. Don't reduce your dear Savior's precious death to that. Faith in Jesus is embracing him and his death and allowing it to be made real in your own life so that you come into that blessed place where he came when He said, "Into Thy hands, dear Father, I commit My Spirit", and your daily life is trusting your God as your own loving Father. Now you can start now.

It doesn't require a big deal, it doesn't require coming up to the altar, you can start now. You can just start now trusting your God as your dear Father and stop worrying and stop being anxious, that's the beginning, loved ones, and you can do it now. Don't sit there and say, "I can't, I can't, I can't". There is a new version of you that has been recreated in Jesus and that's the meaning of his death. That there's a new you that is available, if you want it, but you have to exercise the

little will, just one step and you can do it, you know you can do it this morning, you can. Let's pray.

Dear Father, we thank You that Jesus' death is not an excuse for us to continue in disease but it is a great method of being delivered from that disease of self-trust and distrust of You -- of self-righteousness, of dependence on ourselves and independence of You. Thank You Lord that Jesus' death is able to free us from that. If we are willing to see that the distrust is something that we can never correct but only You can change and then if we are willing to die with Jesus to every person and every thing as a source of what we need and to depend on You alone. Lord, thank You for such a miracle and thank You that we can begin that life of trust and faith today and can be people who are right with God and not simply people who are right. Thank You Lord. Amen.