

As Long as You're Sincere

Romans 10:2

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

"I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened." (Romans 10:2) Paul is speaking about his Jewish friends, and I think God wants to use this to destroy a lie that we often share with each other -- that as long as you're sincere, that is all that matters. We often say that to each other. I think we say it because hypocrisy and pretense are so prevalent in personal relationships. We feel if we can get a person to be sincere, we know who we are dealing with. And so we tend to say that the important thing is that we are sincere.

"Sincere" is from two Latin words: "sine" which means "without" and "cera" which means "wax". It means "without wax". In Roman times, when a crack occurred in marble they would fill it in with wax. Marble without wax was marble that had no flaw in it and was absolutely real the whole way through. So we often feel just a little more content if we can say that the person that we are dealing with is sincere.

Yet it isn't enough to be sincere in everyday life. A road forks; one fork goes north and the other goes east. The one going north goes to a large city, and the one going east goes over a deep chasm, but the bridge has collapsed. Our friend chooses the road east, travels on it at fifty miles an hour, comes to the chasm, flips down and is killed. We don't say, "Well, at least he was sincere." We know the vital factor is not that he was sincere or insincere. The vital factor was that he made the wrong choice. So in ordinary everyday life it is not enough to be sincere; you have to be sincerely right. Hitler was sincere; Stalin was sincere; Machiavelli was sincere; Charles Manson and Lee Harvey Oswald were sincere. The truth is, it isn't enough to be sincere. The question is -- are you sincerely right or are you sincerely wrong? It is amazing that our standards of thinking and acting often operate in inverse proportion to the importance of the subject. We have a tendency to say, "That axiom (as long as you're sincere) doesn't work in everyday life, but it does work in regard to seeking God." If the principle doesn't hold in everyday practical-life situations, how is it going to hold in relationship to the Person who made those everyday-life situations?

How many of us believe that all roads lead to Rome? How many of us have often said that whatever your belief about God, the big thing is that you are sincere about it and that is all that counts? I would like you to know that we toured Italy on a motorcycle and found, to our dismay, that all roads do not lead to Rome, especially when you want to get to Rome. But often we think that as far as God is concerned, it doesn't matter what religion or what you are using as long as you are seeking him sincerely.

I think, loved ones, many of us get that belief from the Bible. Many of us hold that view because of a verse in Scripture, Jeremiah 29:13: "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart." Many of us misinterpret the word "heart". It means the deepest part of you, the best that you can possibly produce. It means that you are seeking him with your intellect, your emotions, your will, your conscience, your whole being. No one living today can say that he is seeking God with the best of all that he can produce in his personality if he is ignoring the unique man who lived in our era and told us more about our Creator than any other human being. It is hard to argue that you are seeking God with the best that your mind can produce if you ignore this person

who split our history into B.C. and A.D., whose birth brought about Christmas, whose resurrection causes us to observe Easter. You cannot say you're seeking God with the best part of yourself and yet ignore the exclusiveness of Jesus.

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.'" (John 14:6) Do you see the forcefulness of that? Jesus doesn't say, "But if you are a Buddhist, as long as you're sincere -- that's what counts!" Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father, but by me." That is why Peter said that there was no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved -- except Jesus. Do you see that when we say that all you need to find God is to be sincere, that is a direct contradiction to Jesus' statement, "No man comes to the Father, but by me"? You say, "Jesus is being narrow-minded!" Yes, he is. He is being very narrow-minded. He is saying that no one comes to the Father -- no one comes to the Creator or finds God real in his life -- unless he comes through me -- and by me. This is the only man in our world who has left the earth, come back, and assured us that he was in the other world and that he knows our Father in a unique, close, intimate way that no other human being does. It is this man that says, "No one comes to the Father but by me."

We are just caviling and arguing for the sake of argument when we say, "Well, wait a minute, what about all the other people who never heard of Jesus?" That is not our situation. Jesus has covered that plainly by saying, "They will be judged by their response to the light that has been given to them." They will be judged by their response to the movement of Jesus' Spirit as he is able to move within them according to the limited light that they have received. We are responsible for ourselves and our colleagues here, so don't drag an irrelevance into the discussion. The truth is, when you and I say, "Whatever you believe, as long as you are sincere about it, that is the main thing. There are many different roads to God and they will all bring you to God eventually. We will all come by different ways, but we all get there in the end" -- the words of Jesus will echo in our ears on our deathbeds if we converse like that. Those words should be, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me."

Why is it not enough to be sincere? Because most sincerity methods, if not all, assume that we are basically OK--that all we have to do is discipline our actions and direct our thoughts a little differently and we will find our way to God. That attitude was the cause of mankind's break with God at the beginning. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:5) We reckoned if we knew what was right and wrong the rest was easy. We would become like God. It's the feeling that, "Oh, sure, just tell me what to do to please God. Just tell me what to avoid to please him, and the rest is simple. I will do it." Of course, the rest is not easy. The rest is not simple. That is why we are led continually into deception and unreality when we assume that we can be like God just by knowing right and wrong. We say, "I am sincere. I live by the Golden Rule." But none of us do live by the Golden Rule. We live by bits and pieces when it suits us, and when it doesn't suit us or is going to hurt us, we don't live by it. The other flaw is that when we do live by the Golden Rule, we feel that it is our own righteousness that has managed to do it. We feel that it is our own good that has produced that Golden Rule in us. People feel that they can be like God outside by their own efforts, because they have goodness inside them.

Look at a verse that not many of us know, that puts all this self-righteousness firmly in its place. Isaiah 64:6: "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." The King James Version says that "all our righteousness is as filthy rags." The

very best that you and I can produce is tainted with self-exaltation, self-glorification and self-will. We are good as long as it doesn't do us any harm, as long as it doesn't hurt us. But inside we have a selfish heart that only pretends to be unselfish, and all our righteousness, compared to the purity of Jesus' Spirit, is filthy rags. By the works of the law no man can be saved -- none of us. It doesn't matter how good we are. It doesn't matter if we have a great day every day. We are still producing it independently of God by our own efforts, the way we want to do it. In other words, even when we are good, we are doing it "my way". To the extent that we are still flesh, we are still temporary people who will not pass beyond this lifetime. We might say, "I am sincere, I believe all the things they say about Jesus. I go to all the meetings. I go to five Bible studies." Loved ones, you can be sincere about all those things and all they are is good works that you are producing yourself. The righteousness in that is only your own and is as filthy rags.

It isn't enough to be sincere. Paul says, "Listen, they have a zeal for God but it is not enlightened." How many of us have a zeal for God, at least a zeal for God's affairs? We love to be with religious people. We love to be among Christians. We love to be where Christian action is. But we ourselves have never ever come to Calvary, and that is the only way to God. God himself says, "You are basically wrong. You are a sinner. You have nothing of my heart in your heart. You live off people and circumstances. You don't live off me. And what you need is to be changed radically from the inside." Loved ones, that is the only way to God; to at last admit that you are all the time trying to defend yourself, trying to establish your own goodness, trying to prove to others that you are good and righteous when inside you are filled with envy and jealousy and unclean thoughts and anger. What you need is to be changed, and it can only be by Jesus. Buddha did not allow you to be placed in himself and destroyed there and raised from the dead. Buddha did not rise from the dead. Muhammad did not allow any man to be placed in himself because he was only a human being. He couldn't. But Jesus, who existed with the Father before the world was ever created, allowed all of us with all of our sincerity and our self-righteousness, pride, indignation, anger, and bad temper to be placed in himself and destroyed in him.

We have been changed. The only way to please God and to find God is to believe that and to accept that one died for all, therefore all of us have died. All of us have been destroyed with Jesus and regenerated and renewed, and all we have to do is accept that and allow his Spirit to produce in us the life and the love of his Father. That is the only way. Sincerity is not enough. The way is actually very narrow. If you go up the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem you will find that it sets forth the spiritual truth -- it is a narrow way. And only those of us who are prepared to admit that we need to be changed inside and are prepared to accept that we have been changed in Jesus, destroyed in him and recreated in his resurrection, will find God.

I don't think there is one of us who will not hear that cliché this week. Some dear friend or colleague will imply "As long as you're sincere...." Do you yourself believe that? If you do, it isn't true. If you agree with them, you are denying your Lord, who will be forced to deny you before his Father in heaven. I know it is awkward and embarrassing and there are right moments to disagree, but I would encourage you, if you really don't believe that, that you begin to share honestly with your friends. Are you on that narrow way? Do you admit that you need to be changed and do you accept that you have been changed in Jesus? You have been; you don't need to live the way you're living now. There is another you that is available to you this moment by the power of the Holy Spirit. Admit that you have been crucified with Christ and you are now with him alive and he is in you. By that very faith you will release the Spirit into your life. You can change today. I pray that someone will say, "I do need to be changed, and I accept that I have been changed in

you and I trust you to live in me now."

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, thank you that you are in us. Thank you that we are with you in our Father's family and that all that you are is now in us. And that we can live this coming week and month by your life and your strength in us – not our own. We ask your Spirit to show us more each of the coming days, of the ways in which you want to be yourself in us, for your glory. Amen.