

Righteousness – Yours or God's?

Romans 10:3

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

How many of you know "Dear Abby"? [an advice columnist] She was interviewed on television recently on the "Today" program. The interviewer asked her, "Is there any big change that you have noticed in American society over the years you have been answering people's problems?" I was surprised how quickly she answered, "Yes, there is one great change. There is more guilt than ever before." Karl Menninger, the psychiatrist who founded the famous Menninger Clinic, says the same thing. The number one problem in our society is guilt. It's strange that guilt should be the number one problem in a permissive society. We have thrown away the book on absolute standards and we are constantly encouraged to free ourselves from all the negativism of the past. We feel that we have utterly rid ourselves of all the inhibitions of the Victorian Age. I don't know if there is one of us who has not been taught that 'puritan' is a dirty word. And who of us have not taken part in castigating the puritanical streak that there was in American history? If that's the case, why are we more guilty than ever before? Surely guilt comes from doing what you know is wrong. But if there are fewer things now that we think are wrong, why do we feel more guilty?

Loved ones, I think it's because we have common sense. We know that we can only get so much mileage out of what the lower-echelon official in the company thinks is right or wrong. We know that sooner or later we have to abide by what the president of the company thinks is right or wrong. We have common sense to know that we can only get so much mileage out of what man-fearing teachers, parents or philosophers say is right or wrong. Sooner or later we are going to have to be concerned about what the owner of the universe thinks is right and wrong. Our guilt comes because our common sense tells us that. In fact, we know that we are the same as the Jews that Paul described in Romans 10:3: "For being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God..." There is no "comes from" in the Greek, it is "tou Theou" -- the righteousness of God. But the interesting thing is the word for "ignorant". It is the present participle "agnoountes" and it doesn't mean "ignorant" in the sense of "don't know" or "never heard". It means "ignorant" in the sense of ignoring the righteousness of God, deliberately repudiating the standards of right and wrong that God has set. If you are in any doubt about that, loved ones, you can see later on in the chapter, in verse 18, there is no question of ignorance in regard to the Jews. "But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have." So you see it is not a case of not knowing, but it is ignorance in the sense of verse 21: "But of Israel, God says, all day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

And we know that we are the same. We have deliberately ignored the standards of right and wrong that God our Creator has set for us, and that's why we feel guilty. We know the ninth commandment says not to bear false witness against our neighbor, and we know that isn't concerned with Watergate or perjury court trials. We know that bearing false witness against our neighbor is saying something about an acquaintance to another person that would actually shock the acquaintance if he heard you say it to his face. It's being false about your relationship with a friend. And yet we keep on doing it. Do you see you can do it as often as you want, but you can never reprogram your conscience which is always registering what God thinks of you inside? So your conscience continues to register real embarrassment when you meet that person again. You try to harden yourself against it, but your conscience keeps reminding you what you said. You are embarrassed and actually a little hurt when you see how open and honest and trusting this person is with you, while you know

that you have actually betrayed them. Now that's why we feel guilt. We deliberately ignore the standards of right and wrong that our Creator has given us. It's the same with the whole sexual business. We know fine well that Jesus said that even having the thought in your mind is as bad as the actual act of adultery. But we regard sex fantasies as a normal part of everyday life and we are beginning to regard fornication -- that is, living with another person to whom we are not married -- as the normal way to begin a relationship. Now loved ones, the conscience inside us continually registers in us that we are not really fully committed to this person with whom we are having an affair. That's part of the reason that we feel guilty. We are ignoring in our own life the standards of right and wrong that our Creator has set for us.

There is another reason why we feel more guilty than any other generation. Our forefathers, when they discovered that they were not living according to the standards of right and wrong that their Creator had set for them, tried to find out how they could get right with God about it. They would at least admit that they were wrong and needed to find out how to get right. Our society doesn't do that. We do what Paul said the Jews were doing in Romans 10:3, the second part of the verse: "...and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." We do that in our society now. We admit that we bore false witness about this friend, but under the circumstances it was the only possible thing we could do. We feel that in certain situations, ethics require that something that is wrong in one context is actually right in another. We were asked our opinion of this person, and it was necessary for the continuing efficiency of the business situation that we tell what we honestly thought of the person -- so really, we not only disobey the ninth commandment, but we justify our actions. That's why we feel guiltier, loved ones. We are not only rebelling against God's opinion, we are usurping his position by establishing our own standards.

Now, do you see that that's more serious? It's one thing to disobey God, but it's another thing completely when we say, "I'm disobeying him, but I'm right because I'm obeying a different standard of righteousness that I regard as superior, more highly developed than his." Loved ones, you know we have done it with this whole sex thing. You say to a couple who are living together outside marriage, "That's fornication!" First of all, they will argue with you about what fornication means, and get into a whole sexy discussion. But then when at last you convince them the Bible means that fornication is living with someone to whom you are not married, they will say, "Yes, if you don't love them it's wrong, but we really love each other." And do you see what we are doing? We are setting up our own standards of right and wrong. We are not only doing what people in the past have done by disobeying God, but we are now saying that we are right in disobeying God. That in certain situations, if you love a person enough, you have a right to do anything you want in your love relationship. It makes fun of the whole idea of love. It means we can make love mean whatever we want it to. We say we want them or we need them or we desire them, so it is right to do whatever we want with them, whether it is fornication or not.

So in our society we are getting into a dangerous position. We are making divorce the norm. Fifty percent of marriages now end up in divorce. The poor little children are beginning to have real problems telling which is normal, marriage or divorce. Which is normal, to be married once only to one person, or to be married to two or three. With due respect to those of you who are single parents, one of the real problems is that there are coming to be as many single parents as there are married parents. Do you see that we are making divorce the norm? That we are making fornication the done thing? Where it is normal for a man and woman to live together outside marriage? We are beginning to say, "That's right, that's normal. It's the way to get to know each other and then later on if you want to draw up a contract, you can do it." We are making expressing your anger and hatred in sensitivity groups the healthy thing to do. Do you see the dangerous place we are coming

to? We are setting ourselves up in exactly the same way as Satan against God. We are saying, "Wrong, be thou my right, and right, be thou my wrong." The result is that the wee souls who look to us for guidance will live in a world that is topsy-turvy. They won't be able to tell which side is up and which side is down.

Now loved ones, that is why there is so much guilt. We are not just disobeying God, but we actually believe that we are right in disobeying him, because we are obeying our own standard. We are usurping God's own position and setting ourselves up as the creators of the universe. It is the kind of thing that was forecast by God in 2 Peter 2:17-19: "These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm; for them the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved. For, uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions of the flesh men who have barely escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved." The source of this kind of attitude is in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-8: "Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming."

It is the spirit of antichrist. It is not just the spirit of disobedience, but it is the spirit of antichrist which sets itself up in the place of God and establishes its own standards. That's why many of us feel guilty. We are actually setting ourselves up in the spirit of antichrist as absolutely lawless people. You can see the difference between a person who recognizes law, feels guilty and tries to get right and a person who refuses to recognize law, sets up his own law and establishes his own righteousness.

Loved ones, why I shared these things with you is that there is only one way to be free from guilt, and that is what it says in the last part of this verse: "To submit to God's righteousness." In other words, agree with your conscience. Divorce is wrong, forbearance is right, resentment is wrong, love is right, selfishness is wrong, unselfishness is right. Accept what your conscience approves as right and what it condemns as wrong.

That's the first step, loved ones; agree with your conscience. Even against your own life, even against your own self, agree with your conscience. Don't sear your conscience. And secondly, marry your will to your conscience. Let nothing come between them. Make your will absolutely submissive to your conscience. The truth is that an integrated personality comes from a clean conscience and the free action of an unselfish will and personal relationship that are intact. A dislocated personality comes from a seared conscience, and the licentious actions of a selfish will litters society with broken hearts and unwanted children. The consequences of your actions confirm as God's word confirms your own conscience.

The third step is the most difficult because it is hard to do right. It is easier to do wrong, to let your temper go, allow your wandering thoughts to run, not to be forbearing and patient. And the reason is that we ourselves have become so twisted and perverted the way we have been living for years that our natures are wrong. So it is natural for us to do what is wrong rather than what is right. That's what God means when he says the law is spiritual but you are carnal. And of course,

what we need is to be changed. That is what it means to submit to God's righteousness. Do you know why Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Do you think it was because he doubted God's love? Do you think he was not sure that his father still loved him? That's not true at all. He ended up saying, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit," so you know it wasn't that he doubted his Father's love at all. Jesus cried "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me," because at that moment you, yourself, the way you are today was being placed inside him and was being exterminated by the X-ray power of God's Holy Spirit, and he sensed that. He sensed the destruction that was taking place of your old self, that perverted twisted nature. He felt so close to you. That is why he cried out, so that you might be united with him in his death and therefore united with him in his resurrection.

That is why this verse says the only way is to be submitted to God's righteousness. That means, "Lord God, I submit myself to what you have done to me in Jesus on the cross. Lord, I am not like you said I should be; I confess that. I agree with my conscience. Lord, I am determined to be what you want me to be. I set my will towards that, but Lord, I cannot unless I now submit myself to the miraculous working that you worked upon me on the cross in Jesus. So, Lord, I submit myself to that dear cross. Lord Jesus, by your Holy Spirit will you change whatever needs to be changed in me?" And loved ones, the miracle is that you have already been changed. You have been recreated in Jesus. And if you will just stop choosing to believe that you are as you are now, and begin to believe that you have been resurrected with Jesus and have been utterly changed and renewed, you will be. The power of God's Holy Spirit will enable your conscience to agree with your will and your will to govern your life. The only way out of guilt is to be freed from unrighteousness. And that is what God has done to you in Jesus. He can change your heart this very day. He can give you a clean heart that will enable you to live as he planned. And loved ones, that is heaven.

Let us pray. Lord God, you see into our hearts. You see how many things are not right there. Lord, we believe that you have changed us in Jesus. It's hard to understand why we seem to be the same now. But Lord, we see that it will be unto us according to our faith. And for years now, we haven't really believed that we are in Jesus Christ on the cross. We haven't really believed that anything that happened to him happened to us. Lord, we choose now to believe that this morning – that somehow you destroyed all that we are – in Jesus. Lord, by your Holy Spirit, we ask you to begin to destroy it in us today, now. Lord, we accept that all that Jesus is, we are. And we accept that your righteousness is to fill us with Jesus. So, Lord God, we accept the destruction of what we have been. We accept now Jesus into us, to be himself, for your glory. Amen.