

Obedience Brings Life

Romans 10:5

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Romans 10:5: "Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by it." We are all so used to saying nasty things about the law and the righteousness of the law that it is important to see what God is saying here. He is saying that if you practice the righteousness that is based on the law, you live by it. I thought at first it meant you apply the law to everybody else, but it means what it says: you will live by it. In other words, there will be a good result. Moses said in Leviticus 18:5: "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live." We have spent so much time thinking the law is always a bad thing, and that when you lay emphasis on the law you are talking about death. Here Paul quotes Moses and says that by practicing the righteousness of the law, a man shall live. You and I have an easy answer, and say that that was the Jewish dispensation, the Old Testament dispensation. That doesn't apply to us. But it is startling when Jesus agrees completely.

Luke 10:25: "And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? How do you read?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have answered right; do this, and you will live.'" Those were Old Testament commandments from Deuteronomy 6:5: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Jesus said, "Do that and you will live."

Now what did they mean, "live"? Did they mean exist? Did they mean biologically? Obviously not, because the lawyer was living at that moment. In what sense will obeying God's laws bring life into you if it doesn't bring biological life?

Remember the question that the lawyer put? He said, "What shall I do?" or, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Then Jesus said, "Do what is written in the law, and you will live; that is, you will have eternal life, you will live eternally." That's obviously what Paul means in this verse, Romans 10:5, when he says Moses wrote that anyone who practices the righteousness of the law shall live by it; that is, shall live eternally. Does that mean forever? "Eternal life" does have the sense of living forever but that is not all it means. I think a lot of us misunderstand the whole Bible because we keep tying eternal life to just infinite duration of time. But really eternal life means far more than that. In fact, infinite duration of time is simply a consequence of what eternal life is here and now.

You get a clue to it if you remember the way Jesus put it. He said, "Listen, I've come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly." Eternal life is a more intense form of life; it is life that is more abundant here on earth. It's a higher kind of experience here and now. You could say that it is the moments of most intense existence you have ever experienced all put together and combined together and raised to the nth degree, intensified to a point you have never up to now actually felt in this life. Those are lovingly and sensitively brought together so that every moment of your life is better than the best moment that you have ever experienced up to now.

Think of a beautiful sandy beach on an island in the South Pacific. Think of the experience that you would have at this very moment if you were in Hawaii, lying back, playing with the sand through your fingers and your toes, with the sun beating down on you. You know how warm your body feels then. You look up, and there is the sun shining on the ocean, and those big breakers are just rolling in one after another. You hear the sound of the breakers and the sea gulls screeching, and you experience a great sense of relaxation and rest. You know how it feels. They would have to cover about a mile of sand just to get the phone to you; the bill collectors couldn't get a bill to you. Those guys are far away, all the bills and the phones and the problems. Think what it's like just wrapped in your own little tropical island cocoon. Think of all the rest, peace, and relaxation.

Think of the greatest moment of relaxation like that that you have ever had. You may think that it comes from the combination of the sun and the ocean and the sand and the gulls, but those are inanimate objects. Those have no power to transmit to a live human being a sense of rest and peace and relaxation. We often think that it is a combination of these things that is giving us a sense of rest and peace, but the truth is, you are experiencing a hint of the deep rest and peace and relaxation that the One who made all those things can create inside you by his own power. All you are doing is experiencing a vague, shadowy hint of the peace and rest that the Creator who made the seagulls, who made the ocean, and who made the wind and the sunshine, can create inside you directly by his own power.

Eternal life is experiencing the absolute rest, peace and relaxation that God can create in you without the use of the intermediate objects. Eternal rest is that absolute rest, peace and relaxation, undiluted by anything that is unharmonious, and is created inside you by God's own power and spirit. That's a part of what eternal life is. Think of the most intense experience of freedom you have ever had: skiing down a slope at Aspen through the powdery snow, the last day at high school, the first time you ever hit over one hundred on the ground, the first pay check you ever got. Whatever it is, think of the feeling you had that you were free from all restraints, free from everything that would try to hold you or corral or limit you. Think of that sense of floating free and high that you had at that moment. The truth is that it is a momentary illusion, because you come to the bottom of the slope and have to line up to get on the chair lift again. An illusion of freedom is a temporary thing. A policeman tells you to cool it to 55, and the first paycheck is spoken for before you get it.

Here is the truth. The one who made the powdery snow and the sunshine moves through space faster and further than any skier ever did. He has more power to shoulder responsibilities with ease than exists in the universe itself, and he is able to convey that to you. He is able to give you such a sense of liberty and freedom in your life free from all restraints, free from all limitations. You are constantly in a sense of being free and being able to do whatever you need to do. That's part of what eternal life is. It comes through knowing him. You know him so well that he begins to rub off on you and you begin to feel that his powers belong to you and his abilities are yours. That is part of what eternal life is. That is why they say, "This is eternal life, to know God and him whom he has sent, even Jesus Christ."

Now that is part of what Paul means, it's part of what Moses means, it's part of what Jesus means when they say if you obey God's law, if you practice righteousness that is based on the law, then you will live by it. Life will come into you, eternal life, more intense life, a super life, a higher kind of life than you have ever experienced before -- where all that you have experienced seems a poor shadow of life compared with what you begin to experience then. It is presumably what

people try to get from drugs, but that is a counterfeit of Satan and destroys as quickly as it creates. Eternal life with God is that experience, plus the sense of the love and commitment that God has for other people.

Why does that happen if you practice the obedience or the righteousness of the law? Here is the truth. Once you unreservedly, absolutely, irrevocably, and wholeheartedly commit your mind and will to obeying, even if you die because of it, you fulfill the condition that is necessary for the miraculous identification of yourself with Jesus on the cross, when he depended on no help but God's. Then his attitude of faith becomes yours, and as a result, God gives you his Spirit and meets all your needs. Once you commit yourself to living life in dependence on God and obedience to his will that is described in the Ten Commandments, God sets you free from the limitations of yourself and of this life. By that commitment, you have passed yourself into a new realm of reality where God is able to manifest his power and his strength in your life. You actually can't obey the Ten Commandments without the power of God's Spirit, but the fact is that the moment a man or woman commits himself or herself to fully obeying them, God immediately sets them loose from the limitations of this present life. He makes all the power of Calvary available to them, changes their natures completely, and gives them the beginnings of this intense form of life that is known as eternal life.

That isn't what the Jews did. The dear Jews in the Old Testament did not practice the righteousness of the law. They did not commit themselves wholeheartedly and completely to commandments like "Thou shalt not covet." You have only to look at Jewish literature to see what they did. Jewish literature consists of commentaries on the law or the Torah, and then another huge collection of Jewish literature consists of commentaries on the commentaries. There is growing up in these days another collection of Jewish literature that is commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries on the law! The dear Jews argued about the law. They discussed the law. They explained the law. But they would not commit themselves to wholeheartedly obeying the law.

They would talk about obeying it. They would work out techniques and ways of obeying it without submitting their wills to it, but they did not obey the law wholeheartedly, completely, unreservedly and irrevocably. If you go to a Jewish seminary you will find that the greatest thing that a Jew would love to do is to discuss the law in the temple with the holy men. That is still one of the dearest things to their hearts, to discuss the law, to explain the law, argue about it, to debate it. Like so many of us -- not to do it, but to explain why they can't obey it, why they have to have the Holy Spirit before they can obey it, why their personalities prevent them from obeying it, and above all, failing to devote themselves wholeheartedly and absolutely to obeying it at all costs.

So, of course, God was not able to give them the Spirit that enables them to actually obey it in detail. The great majority of the people in the Old Testament spent their time with a sense of guilt, a real sense of worthlessness, and so they began to develop little marks of approval that would gain acceptance from their peers. They began to develop their own little laws and their own little standards, and began to practice those. Every time the Bible says you will not be justified by works of the law, it is saying you won't be justified by this set of standards that you have created for yourself and by which you hope to justify yourself. You can be justified only if you commit yourself wholeheartedly to God's will for your life.

I think a lot of us mix things up. We say, "Well, I can't obey the law, that's settled. Now have you got some other way of salvation?" But there is no other way. Jesus died to enable us to obey

the law. Some of you have said, "But, you said I can't obey the law unless I have God's Spirit. And I won't get God's Spirit unless I obey the law. Now where am I?" Loved ones, the Father is so wise. He can look into your heart and he can tell if you are ready to obey it or not. He knows. He knows whether a person is going towards it and saying, "Lord, I commit myself to this commandment. I commit myself wholeheartedly to it." Loved ones, at that moment there is some change God works in your heart and God immediately begins to mirror to you his own richness and his own full supply, and you begin to experience that.

It happened in the Old Testament. Even people like Noah were said to be blameless; they walked blameless before God. So though hundreds and thousands caviled at the law and disobeyed, explained, evaded and sidestepped it, there were dear men like Noah and Job who committed themselves wholeheartedly to it. Because of that God was able to make real in them the change which he worked when he put all mankind into his Son before the foundation of the world, destroyed our hopeless perverted natures, and renewed us completely. He was able to make that real in Noah's life and in Job's life.

So what does the verse say to us? Will you stop trying to get out of God's laws? Let's stop excusing ourselves. What kind of God do you think we have? Do you think we have a God who isn't touched with our infirmities or a God who doesn't sympathize or understand us? Do you think we have a terrible parent up there who says, "Don't covet, don't steal, don't commit adultery; don't have any other gods before me, don't swear" -- and he knows right well that we can't do those things? Do you think we have a God who plays with us, who gives us commandments that we cannot obey?

Our God loves us, and if he has given us commandments, he knows we are able to obey them by the work that he has done in us in Jesus on Calvary. What he is requiring us to do is commit ourselves wholeheartedly and unreservedly to obeying his law from our hearts. He has said what Moses said and what Paul said and what Jesus said -- that those of us who obey God's law will begin to live eternally here in this world by the power of God that he will give us.

Do you see that it is a heart attitude? If you say, "But what about this commandment?" Then we are back to the nit-picking. It is a heart attitude. Obedience is a gloriously, uproariously magnanimous gesture. It isn't a "well, I failed last time -- I can obey for five days, then on the sixth day it gets difficult" attitude. Obedience is a glorious heart attitude: "Lord, you said it, I will do it." The moment you take that attitude in your heart, God gives you the Spirit of his Son, and then you are able to obey him in detail. I used to think I would pretend I was serious, give the impression that I was serious. But God knows. When you say, "Yes, I will obey your law about stealing," or "I will obey your law about adultery," or "I will obey your law about false witness," God knows whether you mean it or not. You may not even know, but God knows. In the light of your meaning it or not meaning it, God gives you the Spirit of his Son.

Do you have things that you know are not obedient to God? Why not stop caviling, why not stop arguing with God? Why not stop debating about salvation by faith or salvation by law? Why not see that they are all one, that you commit yourself to obeying God and he gives you his Holy Spirit. That's why Jesus died. Deal with him, loved ones. I tell you, it throws you into a new realm of reality. It throws you into a new way of freedom.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we see that we are never going to get anywhere if we just obey as we are able, because

we are just not able Lord. We see how many hundred times we have decided, well we'll try, and it has just been a failure. Lord, we see that what we need is an absolute whole hearted, unreserved commitment to your law and to obeying it in our own lives, and then you will make your promise real. You will give us life. Lord, we sense that there is a free place to live; we sense that there is a place above the valleys. We sense that there is a place up there in the mountaintops, where we can fly along above life. And Lord we see that the way to catapult ourselves into that, is to commit ourselves to your standards. And give up trying to live our lives by our own. So, Lord we would do that, each one of us. And the particular things that you have shown us in our lives, we would stop backing off your will. And stop avoiding it and side stepping it. And we would commit ourselves to doing it with all our hearts, with no complaining, and no self pity but just obedient from our hearts. Amen.