

Pessimistic Introspection or Faith

Romans 10:7

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

The obvious question to ask is, have you made any New Year's resolutions? Have you resolved this year to eat three hamburgers and four chocolate sundaes every day for lunch? Or resolved to be more irritable and more bad-tempered with friends in 1979? You know, no, those things come naturally. Those aren't legitimate New Year's resolutions because those we can do without trying. It is interesting that the things that hurt ourselves or hurt others we can do without trying. Really legitimate New Year's resolutions would be, "I resolve to eat fewer hamburgers for lunch in 1979," or, "I resolve to be more patient, or more good-tempered with my friends."

It's interesting -- even though the other things come naturally yet we know they are wrong. Isn't that true? Even though these things we have just mentioned are hard to do, yet we know they are right. And the truth is that none of us here this morning have any problem making New Year's resolutions. We haven't. There is something inside of us that gives us a clear notion of what we ought to do and of what New Year's resolution we need to make. The problem isn't making them -- it's keeping them. I believe that we would agree with Paul who said, "I can will what is right -- that's no problem -- but I can't do it. I can will to eat fewer hamburgers but I cannot do what I will myself to do."

In other words it seems our conscience knows what we ought to do, and our will wants to obey our conscience, but the trouble seems to occur after that. It seems to occur when the will tries to control the mind and emotions and make them do what they are supposed to do. It seems the problem is there. There is some kind of disordered relationship between our will and mind and emotions. There is some kind of dislocation so that the mind and emotions seem to do what they want to do. Actually, the will can tell the emotions to keep their temper. But amazing though it is, the mind seems to rise up against that and even justify the emotions' right to lose their temper. So the break seems to occur there -- between the will, and mind and emotions. I think that that is the situation that most of us find ourselves in. We know what we ought to do, we know the resolutions that we ought to make this coming year, but somehow we find we are not able to keep these resolutions.

That's the situation that Paul describes, if you want to look at it in Romans 7:18 -- it's a verse that we have looked at often: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." Wouldn't you say that that is why many of us have become virtually cynical about New Year's resolutions? We cover up the cynicism with the idea that it is a kind of adolescent thing anyway. But really, underneath, is a dear heart that has often been so torn apart by its failure to keep New Year's resolutions in the past that it just can't bear that pain again. So it evades the whole issue.

Let's look at it a little more closely -- the way our conscience agrees with God's admonition that we should love our enemies. Our conscience naturally rises to that. "Yes, I want to love my enemy. I want to love those who are my enemies socially, who are enemies financially, those who are out to get me. Those who are out to get me socially by their criticism and by their gossip about me; those who are out to get me financially by their dishonesty in their dealings with me. I want to love those people."

But you know what happens -- your mind and emotions for years and the minds and emotions of our forefathers for centuries have been used to depending on their peers' opinions for their sense of value and worth. So they find themselves committed to destroying all peers that do not approve of them. So you send a message down to your mind and emotions to love those who are out to get you, but your mind and emotions are caught in a stimulus-response kind of reaction that automatically moves out against anyone that wants to destroy them, or want to destroy its sense of self-worth or value.

What you find is your mind and emotions shout out your will altogether. It's as if your poor old will is standing up here saying, "Love them, love them," and your mind and emotions are whooping away on their own doing what they want and not listening to you at all. It's a just and automatic reaction that comes out against anybody who criticizes you. You find your emotions lose their temper in a moment with anybody who opposes you or criticizes you or tries to bring you down because they themselves depend on their own self worth. They depend on other people's opinions for their own self worth.

You find it impossible to do anything about it. Now that, loved ones, is the way our carnal, fleshly nature works. We react like little animals and the old conscience and the will yell down the mind and emotions. Really, all men and women have been like that. Some religious leaders have told us, "Your personality shouldn't work like that. You know it shouldn't." Others have taught us how to modify those reactions of that fleshly personality, people like Buddha, but no one has been able to cure that reaction.

Only one man has ever lived completely free from it. Jesus was absolutely free from that kind of response. He did not depend on the opinions of the Romans or the opinions of his peers for his own sense of value. He depended on what his Father thought of him. So he was absolutely free when his conscience constrained his will to love his enemies who were at that moment involved in killing him -- physically and emotionally and intellectually. He allowed his conscience to constrain his will and his mind and emotions obeyed him. He loved them. He wanted the very best for the Roman soldier who plunged the spear into his side. At that very moment he was utterly free to love them and to want the very best for them.

We ourselves are not like that -- are we? It is very hard to want the best for somebody who, at that moment, is trying to destroy you or pull the rug out from under you. If we could only be like Jesus our personalities would begin to operate the way they were meant to.

Now how can you ever become like Jesus? I would like you to look at a verse and then I would like to explain the incredible heresy that is based on that verse. It's Romans 6 and verse 5. It is the way to be like Jesus but there has been a terrible heresy built upon it. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." The way to become like Jesus is that. The heresy is the stigmata. Do you know what it is? The stigmata are the marks -- the nail-prints in Jesus' hands -- that were recreated in the hands of some of the saints down through the centuries. As the saints tried to recreate mentally and emotionally their death with Jesus. You see, they took that verse and they said, "If we are united with him in a death like his then we shall be united in a life like his -- so we must try somehow through meditation and through concentration and imagination to feel as he felt on the cross."

The actual power of mind over matter brought about the prints of the nails in Jesus' hands in their own hands. Some of the great saints became famous for the stigmata that they had in their hands and

indeed some for the hole in their sides. Of course you see what their belief was -- that if they could somehow imagine or experience that-- if they could somehow imagine or experience in themselves mentally and emotionally what Jesus experienced -- then they too would have the same attitude toward their enemies he had to his. If they were united with him in a death like his they would be united with him in a resurrection like his. Most of us of course are horrified at the thought and many of us wonder what the value of that reproduction of the holes in the hands and the sides brought about. But most of us here hate the idea and say, "No, no, that is some kind of psychological trick that they are doing. It isn't the kind of thing that Jesus necessarily wants to happen."

Yet many of us are involved in that same thing. We make a New Year's resolution to be more patient and understanding of those with whom we live and we keep it for two or three days and then we break it. Many of us at that moment plunge into pessimistic introspection. We start looking inside, at what way we have not died with Christ, but we don't think of it for just a moment -- we dwell on it. We try to imagine what it felt like when he was forgiving the Roman soldier that killed him. We try to feel what he felt and we try to bring those feelings inside of ourselves. We try to imagine inside ourselves what it's like to die with Jesus in that situation. We get utterly overwhelmed with trying to recreate mentally and emotionally in ourselves the same attitude that Jesus had on the cross. We plunge, deeper and deeper into a kind of self-crucifixion and self-inflicted penance.

We try to plunge into that abyss that separated Jesus from his father as he bore our sin, and we try somehow to bring that about in ourselves so that we will punish ourselves for failing to keep commandments that he has given us. So we become sad-eyed, depressed, defeated seekers after self-crucifixion, preoccupied with our own sin and preoccupied with trying somehow to get into Jesus' death. Loved ones, there are many of us that do exactly what those old saints did. We try to recreate inside ourselves the feelings that Jesus had on the cross by mental and emotional concentration. We hope that by that means we will begin to feel as he felt towards our enemies. God is so healthy. God is such a healthy God. He is so good at saving us from all our sickness.

Would you look at today's verse: Romans 10:7. We have to read verse 6 to get the context..."But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven' (that is to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." God says -- don't do that. Whenever you find that you have failed to keep some commandment that God has given you or you fail to follow what your conscience is telling you to do, do not plunge into the abyss of pessimistic introspection and of self-inflicted penance and a preoccupation with your sins -- thinking that you have failed yet again -- hoping that in some way by doing that you will bring Christ up from the dead and recreate him in your conscience. Don't do that. God says don't do it. So, loved ones, if you're one of those who gets preoccupied with your sins and gets preoccupied with your own defeat and gets preoccupied with the fact that you don't think you have died with Jesus and you are going to try to die with him -- God's dear word says -- don't do that. Don't descend into that abyss of self-introspection and subjective pessimism hoping that somehow you will bring Christ up from the dead.

Why? Because Christ has already risen from the dead! Christ has already been crucified and all of us have already been crucified with him -- along with that old nature that doesn't work the way it's supposed to. We have already been raised with Christ. So there is no sense in trying to experience it subjectively or psychologically. It's that old mind and emotional relationship to your will that prevents your will dictating to your mind and emotions, that enables your mind and emotions to dominate your will that has been crucified with Christ. It has been destroyed with him. God has

put you into him, Jesus, already, in timeless eternity and has destroyed that old nature that doesn't work right.

That old nature that loses its temper has all been destroyed -- and he has given you a new you. Our mind and emotions will obey our will as it is constrained by our conscience. It has already been done. That's what all those verses say in scripture. 2 Corinthians 5:14 says, "Christ died for all therefore all of us died." All of us. All of us have died. That includes your old twisted personality that has those perverted responses to certain people's attitudes to you. That has been crucified with Christ. That's what Romans 6:6 says... that old self of yours has already been crucified in Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made Jesus who knew no sin to be sin so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." In other words, all that you used to be was destroyed in Jesus and you are free to be what God is telling you to be. It might come home to you if you look at the "learning to swim" illustration again.

How do you learn to swim? Well, you believe the water will hold you up and then you make the appropriate actions. What happens at the beginning when you splutter, breathe the wrong way and go under? What happens? Are there any of us here that would get out on the side of the pool and say, "Boy if I could only feel that the water would hold me up I'd be swimming. Let me think, what would it feel like if the water keeps me up? Let me feel it."

Can you see us all sitting on the side of the pool meditating -- thinking now what would it feel like for the water to keep me up? Can you imagine it? Well, you don't do it because we know that it's a fact that the water will keep us up. It's a fact. Whether we feel it or not it's a fact. We know that with all our feelings our feelings will never keep us up. It doesn't matter how much we feel, that won't keep us up. It's the water that will keep us up. If we get off the side of the pool and do the appropriate actions the fact remains true forever that the water will keep you up, if you act.

Do you see how it connects with Jesus' death? We all have been crucified with Christ. That mind and emotions of yours that will not obey the will has been destroyed with Jesus. That's a fact. And you have a new mind and emotions that will obey your will. That's a fact. The only way to activate it in you is to act -- to get in and live in the basis of that and to keep living on the basis of it till God's Spirit completely recreates your resurrected personality in your body in this present life. Loved ones, there is no place for the pessimism and the penance and raking over the coals inside trying to psychoanalyze yourself -- there isn't. That's like sitting on the side of the pool trying to imagine what it would be like to die with Jesus. The fact is you have died with Jesus. Now get up and act in the light of that. In other words, the truth is, you have a personality that does not need the self pity and the approval of your peers for its sense of self-worth. That's the truth.

Now you also have old sick personalities that need all those things, but that one was crucified with Christ. The new one that you have from God does not need the approval of your peers. It does not need people's praise or people's sympathy to make you feel better. That new personality that you have can thrive on God's good opinion alone. Now live like that. If you say to me, "What happens if someone says something to me and I hurt inside?" You get up and you keep swimming. It's the only way you will learn to swim, because the fact of the water's buoyancy remains and the fact of your death with Jesus remains. The only way to experience it in your life is to live in the light.

So, loved ones, if you think about it, especially some of you who have some of those besetting sins,

you know the things that get you down day after day, and you get up day after day and eventually, because the water does keep you up, you'll find that it will begin to keep you up and you won't splutter and sink. Eventually, because you have been crucified with Christ, the Holy Spirit will begin to keep you up. You will find that you are walking in victory, but only if you act. Never if you plunge into that old abyss.

Will you stop? Stop getting depressed about your own moral impotence and see that in Jesus you can do anything. You will find that true if you keep on doing it. His Spirit will begin to lift you. Let us pray.

Dear Father, as we look forward to this New Year, we see that it's not a matter of one great crisis now. But Lord, we see that it's a simple fact that you have destroyed this personality of ours that will not obey; and you have given us a new one that will obey. And if we keep living and acting on the basis of that, and in the light of that fact, we will find ourselves walking on the water. So Father, thank you for that. Lord, we intend to tackle this New Year with a new spirit of optimism, no longer involved in pessimistic introspection, but exercising realistic faith that we have been changed; and we have a new personality not made with hands, eternal in the heavenlies that is able to obey You and please You and live like Jesus. Thank you, Lord. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and ever more. Amen.