

Universal Atonement

Romans 10:12

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you heard of Wordsworth? Some of you who have suffered through English poetry know that Wordsworth is a famous English poet who wrote a lot about nature. There are many things he believed about nature that we would not agree with, for he went very close to pantheism at times. He wrote a poem called "Intimations of Immortality". He writes of intimations, or "eye-hints", that we have in our own personal experience that we were made to live forever. Some lines from that poem go like this: "Heaven lies about us in our infancy. Shades of the prison house begin to close around the growing boy. At length the man perceives it die away, and fade into the light of common day."

He meant a lot more by that than we would probably mean, but we can see why he says those things. Most of us can cast our minds way back to some lazy summer afternoon, when we were children and life did seem just a bit freer and more spontaneous. It is not that we just suddenly come up against the concrete city prison, school and work, or other things like that. We can see, in some sense, that shades of the prison house do begin to close around a growing boy.

But we can see that they begin to close around us in other ways. We rationalize. We say, "You cannot be a child forever. You do have to enter life's responsibilities. Anyway, life has a way of filtering out the bad side of childhood and remembering the good side." And yet, after you have made allowance for all that rationalization, you do still feel that shades of the prison house do begin to close around the growing boy or girl. It is not in the sense of work and school and this organized society, for "stone walls do not a prison make". But, somehow shades of the prison house begin to close around us inside.

It is inside that we begin to feel gradually imprisoned. We begin to develop learned reflexes. We begin to be able to read the tone of people's voices, and we respond to those tones as we are expected to. We are not quite as bad as Pavlov's dogs that secrete saliva every time a bell rings for food -- but we are getting there! We all know lots of situations where we no longer have freedom to initiate but just seem to be responding. There are all kinds of stimulus-response situations that are turning us into automatons and robots.

So, we read the tone of voice in the Internal Revenue Service man when he wants to audit us. A whole series of complicated responses surge up from inside us that we are not even in control of. We can read the tone of voice in the banker when we need money. We can read the tone of voice in the employer when he is turning us down for the job. We can read the tone of voice in somebody who likes us and we can read the tone of voice in somebody who does not like us. We have a whole set of responses that surge up from inside us that are not us at all. We have no control of them. We have become used to them so that we are virtually like little robots.

What about the spontaneity and freedom that we had as children? Well, "At length a man perceives it die away and fade into the light of common day." We begin to be more and more like little animals, scrambling around from tree to tree and from bush to bush, trying to escape the frightening noises of the forest, trying to survive at all costs in a world that seems bent on our destruction. In order to defend ourselves, we have developed all kinds of responses and reflex reactions that are

not us at all. But, they do somehow keep us alive in this dog-eat-dog world.

We feel, "There hath passed away a glory from the earth." There has passed away some of the freedom and the fun we had inside us as little children. And somehow, there is an answering chord every time we hear those words: "Unless you become like little children, you will in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven." We feel that we would like to be as little children, when we spoke off the top of our heads. We were just ourselves. We said what we thought when we thought it. It was nice because we did not carefully calculate all the repercussions that would follow from what we had said. We did not work out whether we should cultivate this person or not cultivate that person. We just spoke as we felt.

As adults we have somehow swung right to the other end of the pendulum. We now calculate very carefully the repercussions and consequences of everything we say to a person, until, more and more, we have painted ourselves into a corner. To this person we are a certain kind of being. To that person we are a certain kind of being. But neither of them are our real selves. Increasingly we are becoming imprisoned in a mental and emotional apparatus that is developing its own momentum.

Isn't that what happens? You become preoccupied with saying this to this person, because he is a pastor; with saying this to this person, because he is your true friend; with this to this person, because she is your wife; and with this to this person, because he has control over your professional situation. Bit by bit your personality becomes dictated and ruled by these external necessities.

These things are running your life -- all these external necessities -- keeping the job situation right, keeping the family situation right, and keeping the social situation right. All these things demand from us certain responses. We have gotten shrewd at it by now. We can read the stimuli, and we know which response should come. Nobody is actually touching us, and we are not really touching anybody else.

Those learned reflexes that are preoccupied with our own survival are strangely enough also preoccupied with right and wrong. They fall into two categories: (1) Some of us develop a personality that is utterly preoccupied with DOING what other people think is right, and avoiding what other people think is wrong. (2) Others become utterly preoccupied with KNOWING or BELIEVING what other people think is right, and not believing what other people think is wrong. We fall into these categories.

Many men defend themselves by becoming mechanics. They know everything mechanical. That is their claim to survival, and they always respond in terms of knowing everything mechanical. This is their claim to existence. Many of you sisters lay claim to homemaking. You know everything about baking a cake, cleaning a house, and everything about the latest detergent.

It is so dumb! We gradually back ourselves into positions where we are not human at all. We are simply washing machines, or ovens, or wrenches, or screwdrivers. Bit by bit we back ourselves into these spots where we have our claim to fame. The little guy knows all about cars. The little girl knows all about sewing. If we are a little on the intellectual side, we know all about religion, all about fundamentalism, or all about evangelicalism. We built ourselves into things that are caricatures of the real us. And, of course, we are not really free because we are under a continual obligation to prove that we do know everything about these things. We cannot afford to fail, even when we are wrong.

And somehow, "Shades of the prison house" do "begin to close around a growing boy." We no longer feel free inside. In fact, we no longer really know who we are on the inside. We have just become a bundle of responses and reactions.

Do you know that the stereotype of the person who did everything right in the ancient world was the Jew? That is what he was preoccupied with. That was his claim to survival -- that he did what was right, and avoided doing what was wrong.

The stereotype of the person who knew and believed everything that was right, and did not believe and know the things that were wrong, was the Greek. That is part of what the verse we are studying today means: "For there is no distinction between Jew (the person who has become just an automaton who does what is right and is preoccupied with that) and Greek (the automaton who is preoccupied with knowing what is right, believing what is right); the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him." (Romans 10:12)

There is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for they are both imprisoned in a mental and emotional personality that is ruled and dominated by certain reflex responses. They have so ground themselves into this personality that it has become utterly perverted and enslaved to these responses. It no longer expresses him. It conceals him -- in fact, masters him.

He is a poor little prisoner inside his personality. He is not able to use his mind and emotions to express spontaneously the kind of person he used to be. He has forgotten the kind of original creature that he used to be as a child. He has almost forgotten how to act from the inside, to say what he really thinks, to express what he really feels. He has become enslaved to doing what people expect. And so, there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek.

Really, the smoker is in the same situation as the self-esteemaholic. The dear old nervous system has gotten so used to the depressant effects of the nicotine, that the poor old soul is no longer in control of the nervous system. It controls him. He cannot do without the kind of perversion that it has developed.

It is the same with the self-esteemaholic. Such a person is all caught up with self-esteem. He will go anywhere to get somebody to build him up, and he will like anybody who praises him. He is just dying for some self-esteem. He is so utterly dominated by the need for self-esteem that he cannot be himself at all. He cannot possibly like a person who disagrees with him, or somebody who doesn't like him. He is utterly enslaved by a personality that is all the time looking for good comments from people. He has developed a personality that is in charge of him, not a personality that expresses him.

And so, loved ones, it does not matter whether it is a smoker, a drug-addict, an alcoholic, a self-esteemaholic, or something else. Neither the Jew nor the Greek is really free. They are not free to be themselves. They have almost lost the ability to perceive what they used to be. Those lines of Wordsworth are so true: "At length the man perceives it die away and fade into the light of common day."

You get to the point where you can no longer distinguish between the parade of reflex responses that you can produce without even thinking, and the original actions and words that you used to be able to produce as a child from your own intuition. Then the prison is virtually complete. You are

imprisoned without even knowing you are imprisoned.

Now, loved ones, the beauty of this verse is that there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek in another way entirely: "The same Lord is Lord of all." The same Lord of the Jew is the Lord of the Greek. The same Lord is Lord over us all.

Here is the truth: Let's say you are a smoker. Smoking is not at all the worst thing. The worst things are not connected with the nicotine or the drugs. They are connected with the kind of ugly robots we have become, no longer sensitive to the people that we live with.

But if you are a smoker and your old nervous system has gotten used to the addictive effects of the nicotine, God foresaw that you would reject his love and you would try to get relief from nicotine. He foresaw the perversion of your nervous system that would take place, put that into his Son Jesus, destroyed it and recreated you anew. You have a nervous system that is not imprisoned, nor enslaved and perverted. You can take up that new nervous system this moment.

So it is with you who are self-esteemaholics with your dear little eyes -- like frightened little rabbits always searching around for somebody to smile at you, and saying, "Do you like me? Do you like me?" All of us who are self-esteemaholics have developed dear little eyes that run themselves now. We don't run them. They look out for the people who will praise them. They look out for the smiles. We do not have control of our eyes any longer.

God foresaw that you and I would become like that. He took that mental and emotional apparatus that we have made such a mess of, and he put it into his Son Jesus. He destroyed it there and he recreated it anew.

Loved ones, that is the great truth. That is true of every one of you here this morning. "For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died." (2 Corinthians 5:14) That is one of the verses that expresses that our old self was crucified with Christ, that all of us have died and have been recreated anew in Jesus.

It will startle you to know that at this moment, somewhere in the mountains of Peru, there is a dear Indian who is utterly enslaved to certain roots and nuts. They act as a drug or an opiate upon his nervous system. At this moment there is at least one Indian in Peru who is in that situation. There may be many. At this moment, in the slums of Hong Kong, there is a dear drug-addict who is dying from an overdose. He, too, was placed in Christ.

You may say to me, "Wait a minute! He doesn't know about this!" No! The Bible says, "Christ died for all; therefore all have died." Loved ones, God put us all into his Son. He destroyed all our bundles of reflex responses that imprison us. He destroyed them all. He recreated us anew. It has been done already. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." (2 Corinthians 5:17) Everybody has been made new.

If you say to me, "But it says, 'If anyone is in Christ..?'" Yes, but ALL are in Christ. Christ died for all; therefore all have died. All have been placed into Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:17 is not expressing a hypothesis, but that the consequence of anyone being in Christ (and we all are in Christ) is that we are a new creation. At this moment we are completely new. It is a fact.

Many of us want to say God just pops us into Christ the moment we believe. No! The Bible says,

"One has died for all; therefore all have died." You have all been made anew. That's why Paul says, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them..." (2 Corinthians 5: 18-19)

You see, "the whole world" includes the guy dying of an overdose in Hong Kong at this moment, and the dear Indian in Peru absorbing drugs into his body. God reconciled the whole world to himself. He put the whole world into Christ, destroyed it there, and recreated it anew. It's not just people who already believe in Jesus.

That is what we call "universal atonement." God has done it for all of us. It has all been done. Every one of the billions of us alive now has a recreated self that is ready and available. Now, does that mean we are all saved? Do you mean Communists and atheists? Well, loved ones, you have to go by what the Bible says: "Christ died for all; therefore all have died." Does that mean that we are all saved? There can be no doubt about the answer: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all." That's universal atonement. Does he bestow his riches upon all? No, he bestows his riches upon all "who call upon him."

We are all in Christ by God's placing. If I told you that this room was full of good fresh air, but you believed it was filled with poisonous gas -- that good fresh air would never come inside you. If you refused to breathe it, you would die despite the fact that you are utterly surrounded by good, clear air. In other words, loved ones, atonement is universal, but regeneration (or salvation) is conditional. You have to believe that it is so, and you have to be willing to be freed.

The reason you are a robot or an automaton, the reason you feel you are in prison, the reason you lack the spontaneity and freedom you had as a little guy or girl, the reason you are dominated by responsibilities and obligations, the reason you are burdened with all these things and why they take away your freedom -- is that you will not recognize that God has put you into his Son. In his Son he utterly destroyed that old self that imprisons you and utterly recreated you so that you can be free.

If you will just breathe! There is pure, clean air in this room. All you have to do is breathe it in. But you might continue to believe those lies. "This is poisonous gas! I wasn't in Christ! This nicotine has got such a hold on my nervous system, that I cannot stop smoking! I cannot live without recognition by other human beings!" Loved ones, if you believe those lies, that is the way you will live for the rest of this life. And that is the way you will die. You will live forever in a prison that is of your own making.

Truth and reality is this: there is not one of us in the world who was not put into Jesus our dear Creator, and has not been utterly destroyed and recreated in Jesus. If you will simply believe that -- be willing to be freed from those things, and ask Jesus to begin to free you by his Spirit -- that is what you will begin to experience. And loved ones, it can be yours. You can do it this morning. Without a whole lot of fuss, you can simply begin this morning.

Let us pray. Dear Father, I ask you to help my brothers and sisters to pray, especially if they never prayed before. Lord Jesus, we just address you and thank you for dying for us. We have not really known that we were in you. We thought, Lord, that it was only the Christians who were in you or only those who believe. But we see that we were in you, and that you bore in your own dear body

all the racking pains that our old enslaved, addicted bodies have had. Lord, we see that you did that for us, even though you couldn't be sure how we would respond to you at all. Lord, we want to thank you for that. We want to thank you, Lord Jesus, that every turn of our eyes, every automatic response of our nervous system, every little learned reflex that we have developed -- that imprisons us -- was borne by you in your own body, mind, and emotions, and destroyed in you on Calvary.

We want to thank you that we have been raised up as you were raised up. We want to thank you there's a new "us" that is available to us, with a new, clean, fresh nervous system, a clean emotional system, and a mind that is as fresh as when it first came from our Father's hand. We can take up that apparatus this moment, by faith, and we can be new, spontaneous, free children again. Lord, thank you for that. By your Holy Spirit and as we study the Bible day by day and pray to you, we ask you to lead us into all the freedom that you've won for us. Make us what we were meant to be -- free, joyous, spontaneous human beings. Make us free to add to the beauty of the world instead of to be enslaved to its approval. Thank you Lord. Amen.