

Ever Heard God's Voice?

Romans 10:18a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

You remember last time we were talking about what is actually happening when one of us begins to try to explain what our Creator has done for us in Jesus. You remember we said it is that great act of our Creator in Jesus that sets Jesus apart from every other religious leader who has claimed to explain reality to us. That is why it is imperative for us to spend our lives telling the world about Jesus and about what has been done to us in him.

The problem that our Creator dealt with in Jesus is the problem of our moral perversity -- that irrational selfishness in each one of us that is prepared to destroy us, if only to get its own way. I don't think there is one of us that has not at some time sat in the midst of the ruins left by some burst of bad temper on our part, or some outburst of greed, or some desire to get our own way.

As we have sat there in the midst of the ruins of personal relationships, or in the home or the office situation, have we not wondered at that very moment, "Why on earth did I do it?" And yet the next moment, if the opportunity offered itself, we would do exactly the same thing again.

It's that moral perversity in our nature that God dealt with in his Son Jesus. All other religions merely tamper with it. Islam tries to legalize it out of us with rules. Hinduism tries to frighten us out of it by getting us to placate the evil spirits that apparently caused it. Buddhism tries to will it out of us by a method of auto-suggestion and self-discipline. Only in Jesus has our Creator destroyed that morally perverse nature and recreated it anew in his Son and in his resurrection.

When I started to share this truth about 15 years ago -- the great loving act that God has done to us in his Son -- I couldn't understand why everybody did not respond the way I did -- why everybody didn't just rise up and believe it with joy and happiness. I couldn't at all understand the opposite reaction: "Oh, that old Paul! Determined to know nothing among us except Christ and him crucified. The same sermon Sunday after Sunday. I've heard it before. I've got beyond that, and I don't need that any longer."

That reaction bewildered me. So it does with all of us who first started experiencing the death of Jesus and sharing it with others. We cannot understand those loved ones who say, "Oh, it just gets me down."

The thing that has brought deliverance to us, they complain gets them down. "Oh, it is bringing me into heaviness. I need something a little lighter, something a little more uplifting." Truth that seems to lead so many people into joy and life and peace leads others into introspection, self-centeredness, boredom, depression and a kind of critical attitude.

The secret is enshrined in the New Testament lesson, which explains that apparent paradox of two responses to the gospel. It's Matthew 13:13-14, the parable of the sower and the seed: "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: "You shall

indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive.””

That was what it was like for some. They appeared to hear what I heard, but they really didn't hear. They appeared to see what I saw, but they really didn't see. Suddenly I realized that it is possible for people to sit side by side and both appear to hear what God has wrought for them in deliverance from self in Jesus, but one of them hears and really does hear, and the other hears and really doesn't hear.

Why is that so? Jesus explains it in the next verse. He uses Isaiah's quotation in verse 15: "For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.”

Jesus says, "The people don't hear because their heart has grown dull." What does he mean, "Their heart has grown dull"? Loved ones, he explains it in verse 18 as he goes on to elaborate the meaning of the parable of the sower of the seed. "Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what is sown along the path.”

So it is possible to sit Sunday after Sunday and to hear with your mind and to hear with your emotions, but not at all to hear with your conscience or your will. You hear just with your mind and emotions, and you are attracted to the logicity of the whole thing.

It does seem the only reasonable explanation of reality. Your mind rises to it and embraces it, and even your emotions are stirred by the apparent joy and happiness behind it. But when it comes to your conscience, you stop. The evil one is able to snatch the word of God from you before it gets to the part of you that really matters.

C.S. Lewis was excellent at describing how Satan operated. He has a book of letters from a senior devil to a junior devil entitled "Screwtape Letters". He gives an example of just what we have been talking about -- how a person can entertain the thing in his mind and emotions but refuse to let it go any further.

The senior devil is talking to his junior devil about a "patient" of theirs -- that is, one of us, who they are lying to, to get to go their way: "I once had a patient, a sound atheist, who used to read in the British Museum. One day as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy, of course, was at his elbow in a moment. Before I knew where I was I saw my twenty years' work beginning to totter. If I had lost my head and begun to attempt a defence by argument, I should have been undone.”

“But I was not such a fool. I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control, and suggested that it was just about time that he had some lunch. The Enemy [that is, God] presumably made the counter suggestion (you know how one can never quite overhear what he says to them?) that this was more important than lunch. At least I think that must have been his line, for when I said, 'Quite. In fact much too important to tackle at the end of a morning,' the patient brightened up considerably; and by the time I had added, 'Much better to come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh mind,' he was already halfway to the door.”

“Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper,

and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of "real life" (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all 'that sort of thing' just couldn't be true. He knew that he'd had a narrow escape and in later years was fond of talking about 'that inarticulate sense of actuality which is our ultimate safeguard against the aberrations of mere logic.' He is now safe in Our Father's house."

Part of what Jesus is saying is that it is possible to hear with your mind or with your emotions and not let God's word go any further. Jesus explains it, as he goes on to elaborate the two other kinds of ground that the seed of God's word falls on. He says in verse 20: "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."

It is possible for you to sense the joy and the peace and the love in this room. Your emotions are stirred. You think it is beautiful and that is the way you want to go. But then persecution or some truth begins to get to you that threaten your happy feelings, and like all true hedonists, you decide that you will not follow anything that will spoil your pleasure, so you begin to back off.

Then Jesus talks about those of us who entertain it with the mind, in verse 22: "As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." So our minds are attracted to the logicity of the whole truth, and we agree with our minds. But then we go out and we begin to find our minds preoccupied with the more immediate concerns of the cares of this world and of trying to become prosperous, and we begin to stop listening and to stop allowing God's word to go any deeper.

So you see it is possible to sit Sunday after Sunday while your mind agrees with the truth that you hear and your emotions are stirred by it, but you do not let it touch your conscience or your will. You never become aware of the ways in which God's will crosses yours. You never become aware of the enlivening power of his Spirit.

You appear to hear, but you don't really hear -- until someday, the preacher and his limited knowledge of you and of your life fades into the background, and you begin to sense that there is a voice speaking inside you who seems to know your life and seems to know the very things that are in your heart. That voice seems to be speaking directly to you. Suddenly you realize that this is Jesus himself preaching to you.

It is not man. It is Jesus applying his cross to your conscience. You suddenly begin to sense that he is showing you selfishness in your life -- the selfishness he delivered you from through his death.

Jesus begins to show you himself looking at his mother weeping at the foot of the cross, weeping because of what her son has now come to. You begin to sense that your concern for your parents' approval was destroyed in Jesus.

You see Jesus looking at the broken band of disciples and you begin to realize that your dependence on your friends and on your possessions was destroyed in Jesus on Calvary. You look at Jesus and you see him with those bleeding wounds, and looking up at the darkness of the sky above him. You

begin to realize that your right to have happy circumstances and favorable events taking place in your life were destroyed in him.

Jesus is asking you, "Are you willing to submit your will to what your conscience is telling you what God did to you in Jesus?" That, loved ones, is that moment that Thomas More talked about in "A Man for All Seasons." He said, "There comes a time in each of our lives when we hold our life in our hands, like water. If at that moment we open even just the smallest slit between our fingers, our life will drain out of our hands and be lost forever."

That is the moment when God is making his voice heard in the part of you that matters. Not your mind, not your emotions, but your conscience. God is asking if you are willing to submit your will to what your conscience is telling you -- that he has destroyed and done away with your life in his Son. Then loved ones, believe me, either all heaven breaks loose in your life or all hell breaks loose in your life.

All heaven breaks loose, and you determine that you will follow truth wherever it leads. You look honestly at the ways in which the cross is striking out the "I" (that's what a cross is -- an "I" with a bar right across it). It means the destruction of your right to your own life and your right to your own ways. You say to yourself, "Whatever has been destroyed in Jesus, that will be destroyed in my life." You will repent and change your will and change the whole direction, the whole emphasis, and the whole orientation of your life -- from self and society to Jesus and God's fellowship.

The moment you do that, the Spirit of God comes into your life and regenerates your spirit. You are actually born again. You begin to know God as a person. You begin to love Jesus himself.

You begin to enter into a whole new spiritual world and to yearn for the preaching of his word. You don't do this because of the rational words or because of the good feelings -- but because each time you hear his word, the spirit inside you that has become aware of Jesus begins to receive strengthening and confirmation.

You enter into that miracle of Christ's body. The very things that God has been talking about to you, he prompts his servant to speak about that Sunday. Suddenly you find yourself in a world of harmony, and look forward to the feast of spiritual food that God is spreading before his body each week. No matter who the preacher is, you begin to receive life from your Savior Jesus.

Or loved ones, all hell breaks loose, and you begin to resent the conviction of his Holy Spirit. You resent this attack on your personal life, and object to this meddling in your life that the cross brings. You hate the very thought that this cross is supposed to tell you what is right and what is wrong -- that this cross cuts across your ability to decide what you ought to do and what you ought not to do.

You begin to detest the very sound of this Christ crucified. In defence against it, you begin to criticize it, and then -- you claim a kind of blasé boredom with it as you hear it, because you are determined that it will not touch your conscience. It will not influence your will, and you will continue to love your own life as your own god.

Gradually, the preaching of Christ crucified becomes anathema to you, something that brings heaviness to you. As you lie under the conviction of the Holy Spirit you say, "Oh, it is false

condemnation." Yet the Spirit continues to witness to your conscience, "No, those things are in your life. You are proud. You are angry. You are jealous."

The more the Holy Spirit continues to be faithful and convict you, the more you reject it and react against it. Then you take the step of blasphemy, of hearing the voice of God and saying, "That isn't the voice of God. Those are men's ideas. They are the wrong opinions of a preacher, but it is not God's voice speaking to me." Then you take the further step into counterfeit religion as you say, "I will find me a preacher that will preach what I believe and what I want to hear. I will find a gospel that suits my way of life."

But once God's voice touches your conscience, you hold your life in your hands. You at that point determine whether you will really hear, or whether you will hear only with your mind and your emotions. If you determine to continue to go to church Sunday after Sunday and listen only with your mind and your emotions, it will make you sick. Eventually you will not be able to bear it.

Because we are sophisticated; you can't throw stones at the preacher. But you will do it some way. You have to either submit to the word or get rid of the source of the word. The tragedy is that at that point so many of us who have not been trained in the exposition of this word suddenly become brilliant expositors, and suddenly are ready to challenge anybody, whatever training they have had. We are ready to correct them in their interpretation of God's word.

The moment you do that, you take yourself out of the place where God can touch you. It was Luther who said, "Our only hope is that we sit before the bar of Holy Scripture and allow it to judge our consciences and our lives." The moment you begin to sit in judgment on the bar of Holy Scripture, on the very judgment place itself, at that moment you have become God and you begin to be untouchable.

Until I saw these things I never understood a statement that Paul made that describes what happens every Sunday with us. It's 2 Corinthians 2:14-17: "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word; but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ."

Romans 10:18 says, "But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have." Have we not heard? Well, if it has touched your conscience, indeed you have. And then Luther's words apply to us: "See thou then to it, how thou standest."

Let us pray. Dear Father, we would thank you for clarity. We thank you, Lord, that it isn't a matter whether we like the Catholic church or the Protestant church or the Methodist church or the Baptist church. It isn't a matter of whether we like Oral Roberts or Jerry Falwell. Lord, it isn't a matter of men.

It is a matter of our conscience, and your dear word, that cuts to the very quick of our life, and judges us at the very depth of our being. Lord, thank you for showing us that it isn't a matter of personal likes or dislikes. It isn't a matter of false condemnation, or not getting enough reinforcement or uplift.

We are engaged in a holy task. We are at the very threshold of heaven and at the very threshold of hell every Sunday morning, and you are watching us to see how we respond. Lord, thank you for showing us that this is not some human reinforcement society, but this is the very preaching of Christ himself, apart from the inadequacies of men's words -- the very preaching of Christ to our innermost hearts. Thank you, Lord, that every time we judge, we are being judged. Thank you for making it clear. Thank you for showing us that the response deep down within of criticism and complaining -- or of joyful acceptance and commitment -- determines where we will spend eternity.

Dear Lord, I pray now for any loved one here who has heard your word in their conscience. I pray Lord that you will reveal to them now, that all they have to do is submit their wills to what their conscience is saying, and change their life accordingly. And the power and life of your Holy Spirit will come in, and make real in them the deliverance from selfishness and moral perversity that you worked for us in Jesus. We thank you, Lord. Amen.