

Is God Real to you?

Romans 10:20

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

One of the most colorful generals of the Second World War wore a pearl-handled revolver and used language that made the army blush. You probably know who he is: the one and only General George Patton.

I do not know where Patton is now, and none of us has the right to say whether a person has gone to be with God or is not with God. So, we do not know that, loved ones, and I am not bringing Patton's name up this morning to make any comment on his relationship to God.

But I think there were some things that happened in his life that God wants to use in our lives. In order to share with you what God has shown me, I have to use Patton's own words -- even though they may be very offensive to you, and you may just never come back to this place again. I find these words very difficult because swearing was not one of the many sins that I had a problem with in my life. Yet, you know that Patton spoke that way.

There are two incidents I would like to share with you, and I believe that God wants to show us something through them. The first occurred during a press conference. A reporter put one of those personal questions to Patton, and said, "General, it's said back home that you read the Bible every day. Is that true?" In typical Patton style, Patton said, "Sure it's true! I read the Bible every God-damned day!"

I know that we think it is bad even to repeat that. Yet, is it not true that many people use swear words without really knowing what they are saying? And it is true -- whatever his motives for doing it, or whatever results came from it -- that he did read the Bible every day.

We need to be a little careful ourselves, that we do not put ourselves in the same corner as the Pharisees. We may laud our own freedom from swearing, and we may look down on his use of language. Yet we may be in a position where we ourselves do not read the Bible every day. If we do that, we put ourselves in the position of the Pharisees whom Jesus spoke to, saying, "You strain at a gnat. You complain about somebody using language different from you, but you swallow a camel. You, yourselves, don't read my word." So, will you just keep that in mind as we go on to the second incident?

It occurred during the winter campaign of the Second World War when Patton was put in charge of the relief of Bastogne. He had planned a surprise attack for the next day, depending absolutely and utterly on being able to move his troops fast. That night the snow came bucketing down from the heavens, and it seemed that the whole of Europe was sliding away. The roads were mud-baths and nobody could move any piece of equipment.

Patton called for the chaplain and said, "Chaplain, I need a weather prayer!" And the chaplain said, "What did you say, General?" And Patton said, "I need you to write a weather prayer. You know, a prayer for favorable weather tomorrow." Retreating, as we religious people are so good at doing in the cover of our own theology, the chaplain said, "Well, General, I don't think the Almighty would appreciate a prayer for favorable weather that we might kill our fellow man." And

Patton said, "Chaplain, I'm on personal terms with the Almighty. You write a good prayer and he will answer."

You, who know the course of the Second World War, know that the next day the sun was shining. Patton moved all his troops out and the battle was won.

Now, the moral of the story is not that you should read the Bible, swear, and write weather prayers. And it certainly is not that you should fight wars or that war is right. It certainly is not that you should treat God as a magician to answer all your daily needs. But the moral of the story is this: God makes himself real and reveals himself not to those who philosophize and fantasize about him. But he makes himself real to those who engage and trust him in the everyday actions and events of their lives.

Many of us here know and understand better than Patton why we should read the Bible everyday. But -- he did read the Bible -- and many of us do not. Many of us here this morning know and understand better than Patton ever did why we can trust God in every practical situation that we face in our lives. But he, Patton, was so sure that he could do that, that he based the movement of thousands of troops and material on God's faithfulness in answering prayer. But many of us would not base even one little step in our career on that faithfulness.

That is why there are many religious people to whom God is very unreal. And strangely, there are many irreligious people to whom God is very real -- because God reveals himself and manifests himself to those who engage and trust him in actual events and actions of their everyday lives -- not to those who study about him and philosophize about him.

Do you see? That is exactly what happened to the dear Jews. They have been the experts on religion from the time the world began, because God chose them to tell them about himself, so that they could tell the rest of the world.

Every Jew heard at his mother's knee about God's faithfulness. They heard about their forefathers traveling from Egypt to Israel through the wilderness, and how God made miraculous breadlike food appear on the ground every morning, a manna that fed hundreds of thousands of Israelites right through the wilderness. At their mother's knee they heard about how God broke down the walls of the city of Jericho, so that the Israelite army could move in and destroy an army that was three or four times its size.

They had also heard for years about how untrustworthy man is. They had heard how their predecessors had repeatedly resorted to their own ways and to the counterfeit gods of their neighbors, often the very moment after God had brought some great deliverance to them.

The Jews knew these things. They had more knowledge and understanding than anybody else on how much you could trust God to come through in your everyday life -- and how it was absolute madness to try and run your life by your own ideas, or by depending on the favorable actions of other human beings. They knew better than anyone else that the only way to live life, and the only way that God could become real to you, was to trust him in life's everyday situations.

They knew that God was going to send his own unique servant to the earth some day. They knew that there was a Messiah coming, according to their prophets, one whom God would actually call his Son. They knew that this Son would come to earth and change their untrusting, independent hearts, and

would provide them with personalities that would be able to trust God day by day. They knew these things.

It had been described to them how this man would be “despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” {Isaiah 53:3} He would not even speak back when he was charged by the judges. They knew from Ezekiel that this man would give them a new spirit, and a new heart, and would take away the heart of stone. They knew all these things.

Yet, those dear Jews did not recognize this Messiah when he came. Instead they took part in religious games that they had begun to devise. They took all this knowledge and understanding that their parents had passed on to them in order to enable them to trust God in the everyday events of their lives. They turned the whole thing into a religious game of temple worship and certain laws that this person had to obey and that person had to obey.

So when Jesus came and refused to take part in preoccupation with their temple ritual and abstruse arguments about the law, they did not recognize him as the one they had been looking for for so long. Instead he talked to ordinary people, telling them not to worry about the things they were facing, about the things they were going to wear, and about the things they were going to eat. He spoke of the Heavenly Father who knew that they needed those things and would provide them. He said that they needed to enjoy his love and then to share the gift of his love with other people freely.

They did not recognize this nonreligious man who came with such down-to-earth and commonsense teaching. Instead, they missed him completely. So, loved ones, the religious Jews missed the Messiah when he came, while the nonreligious Gentiles rose to him and began to live that way.

Do you realize that the early church was therefore a Gentile church? The early church was not a Jewish church. Except for a few disciples and some others, the church was a Gentile church because the Jews had expected a religious leader who would be preoccupied with religious things.

The Gentiles rose to a person who told them that trusting God was a matter of day-to-day events and actions. Here is the way Paul puts it in Romans 10:18: "But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for, 'Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.' Again I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, 'I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.'"

And then Paul says in the verse we are studying today, Romans 10:20: "Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, 'I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.'" God became real to the people who were not preoccupied with finding him in the form that they had been worshipping for years. He was found by the Gentiles.

I think a lot of us are here this morning because we have been honestly seeking God, trying to make him real in our lives for years. But loved ones, do you know that it is very easy to turn that into a kind of religious game, where you concentrate on making the right moves and avoiding the wrong moves?

You can become preoccupied with techniques of prayer, or tricks of believing, or you become taken up with how much sin is consistent with the life of a Christian. It is very easy to turn the whole thing into a religious game, and God will never become real to you in that.

God becomes real to you in a different arena completely -- in the arena of everyday life. It is in that arena of robust faith that God makes himself real to you. But, I sometimes think that many of us here are most defensive and most apologetic when it comes to our interaction with God in that arena.

We talk about him, philosophize about him, read about him, and think about him. But when it comes to dealing with him in the arena of Monday through Friday, and moving out on limbs of faith as old Patton did, then we are apologetic and defensive. We say, "Well, you can't expect me to do that! I'm trying! I'm trying!"

What I would love to share with you this morning is this: Do not get paranoid over the fact that it is a sin not to do that. Forget that for a moment. Forget the business that it is a sin. The fact is -- you are missing God by not doing it. You are missing the reality of God in your life!

That is why he is not real to you. You keep him boxed up in a little religious set of philosophies and thinking. But, when it comes to trusting him for good weather for the next day you say, "No! No!" and you kind of apologize your way out of it.

Whether that is right or wrong is not the issue. Do you see that? The issue is: Do you live like that day by day? Do you worry about money, or your job, or certain people you have to deal with? God said, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Philippians 4:6)

Stop sulking and saying that you are trying to do that! Stop saying that you know you should do that and that you know it is a sin not to do it! Stop it! Do it! Commit the thing to God.

Stop this minute your worry about money! Commit it to God. Write your weather prayer. Leave it with God and have done with it. That is what faith is. It is in that kind of faith that God answers. Just stop worrying about the money, or that person you think has taken advantage of you. Stop thinking about that person! Commit that person into God's hands and say, "Lord, I trust you to take care of whatever he is able to destroy."

Do you tithe? Do you give a tenth of your money to God? Stop debating about it! Stop discussing whether it is enough, or whether it should be after tax dollars or before tax dollars! Stop your religious Pharisaical games! Stop trying to control the thing! That is not giving. That is just extending your ability to do things. Stop all that silliness! Give the tenth! Give it away! Commit yourself. Take a step.

Loved ones, faith is not debating whether a tithe is right or wrong. Faith is not discussing what will be done with the tithe. Faith is not calculating to discover what the tithe is. Faith is dividing the salary by ten and plunking the money somewhere. Anywhere! But get rid of it!

Faith is action, and in action God begins to become real to you. Are you worried about your future, about your marriage, about the way your career is going, or about where you are going to live? God said, "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act." (Psalm 37:5) Do that! Stop sulking, stop being surly, stop saying, "Well, if you weren't married you'd be worried too. This society makes it very hard for a girl not to be married; or it makes it very hard for a guy to find the right girl."

Stop that silly sulking! Trust God! When you see a fellow like Patton, (and I don't know whether he is in heaven or hell), doesn't your heart rise when you see the dear fellow going out like that in action? Don't you feel that you'd like to do that kind of thing, instead of talking about it eternally? Just do it!

Stop looking for a partner! Stop watching for some guy or some girl to look at you! Stop hoping that you will get the job you want! Stop that stuff! Stop depending on people and outside forces! Trust God! Commit it into his hands and live rejoicingly. Faith is action.

If you say to me, "I can't do it!" -- sure you can. When you go into a room and find your eyes going over to that girl, take your eyes off that girl. That's it! The same goes for those of us who are concerned about jobs. We know that you speak nicely to a particular person because you know he can help you get that job. Stop doing that!

Faith is not some kind of terrible inner struggle. The terrible inner struggle is your refusal to have faith. It is not a struggle to have faith – the struggle is your refusal to trust God. Faith itself is action. Coming up to the River Jordan: "Am I going to walk into that thing or not? I go into it." Faith is not thinking, "Yeah, I'm thinking I'm walking into it. Oh yeah! Boy, those waves feel cold!" Faith is walking in. Faith is action.

Loved ones, that is what the verse means. God made himself real to those who were not seeking him, simply because they trusted him in everyday events. He revealed himself to those who did not ask for him, simply because they responded to his words in Jesus, "Trust me as your loving Father, and walk rejoicingly. Enter into great enterprises of faith. Enter into the great robust arena of action and faith, and I will make myself real to you."

Loved ones, it would do your heart good if you would start living that way. It really would, because the other stuff is sick, sick, sick! It really is. And, it would do you a world of good if you stop all this internalizing, this meditating, and this thinking -- and if you would begin to see the simple fact that you were made by a dear loving Father who cares about your life more than you care about it yourself.

He has the whole thing planned. If you trust him and concentrate on pleasing him and loving him, and live rejoicingly every day, your life will be a success in his eyes -- whatever it is like in others. I would pray that some of you will step out into faith and into a reality of God this very day.

Let us pray. Dear Father, we don't know where the dear man is, but we do thank you for men like Patton and others. For whether they attended to these truths or not, they were able somehow to be a channel -- for you to show us what it is to live a robust life of faith with you, instead of this weak and watery life of religious thinking and meditation.

Lord, we'd pray you'd show us each one right now what particular thing we have to go out on a limb of faith for now, and turn into your hands and forget forever. Lord, show us whatever that is. If anything is eating away at somebody's dear heart here in this room now, will you show them that that's none of their business? That's your business. And enable them to turn it over to you and stop pulling themselves further down into depression by trying to deal with something that they cannot deal with.

Then Lord, will you show us most of all where you want us to go out on limbs of faith? Not simply to take Bastogne, or to take some land from some human enemy, but to take this world back from the enemy that has taken control. Will you show us each one how to begin the great robust enterprise of a faith life, to bring this dear world into a knowledge of you? Lord Jesus, we want to be like you. We want to be healthy, robust, outgoing people who trust their God in the everyday life and actions of their own existence.

We ask you Lord, to show us where we have to do that, and then we'll obey. We know, Lord God, that you will at last become real to us. And 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 evermore. Amen.