

Trying to Get into Jesus

Romans 11:7

Sermon transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

It's easy to look at each other here and think everybody feels very close to God. We think: all the others are closer to God than I am. But the fact is, many of us here don't feel very close to God. There are many of us who know that God exists, but we don't really know him ourselves. We don't really feel that he knows us. We know that he's a holy God, and we know that he is kind and loving and has a pure and clean heart. We know, too, that he has no time for people like Cain who killed his brother Abel. He has no time for people like Jezebel who lived in hate and lust. He has no time for that kind of person.

In fact, further than that, we know that far from just not having time for them, he is actually committed to their destruction. He's committed to destroying people like Jezebel, who live in lust. He's committed to destroying people like Ananias and Sapphira, who you remember sold some property, then lied about the money they got for it. You remember -- God struck them dead. So we realize that our God is somebody who hates and detests dishonesty and selfishness and hypocrisy. We realize he's someone who hates people like the Pharisees who are outwardly religious and inwardly are full of greed and covetousness and dishonesty.

You can see that's one of the reasons that many of us don't feel very close to God -- because we know that's the way God feels about those things. We know that he feels that way about those things because those attitudes show that we don't trust him. We realize that he must therefore feel that way about those things when he sees them in us.

I think many of us do feel we are dishonest at times. We are unclean in our thought life. We are covetous at times, and we are angry and bring pain to other people. So it's very natural that many of us reading this will feel, "No, I don't feel very close to God. Some of the reasons are that I don't feel I'm the kind of person that he'd want to be close to!"

Yet the strange thing is, we all know that's the only thing that really matters. We know fine well how important it is to have a right relationship with our roommate, or with our parents, or with our friends or colleagues. We know if you don't have that, life fills with strain and becomes not worth living. So we know it's very important to have right relationships with people.

We're no fools! We know that if it's important to have a right relationship with our parents and colleagues and friends or our brother or our professor, it's far more important to have the right relationship with the one Person who created the whole universe and runs it at this present time. We know in our hearts that if it's important to have a right relationship with the significant others in our lives, it's essential to have a right relationship with the one significant Other that really matters in the whole universe.

And yet I think it's true to say that, many of us here would feel, "Well -- No! I don't know that I could say that I'm right with God really! I don't know that I could tell you that I feel close to him."

The interesting thing is that we usually see it in terms of a social relationship. That's natural,

in a way. We say, "Oh, I see! 'Feel close to God', and 'he's a person'. OK, that's a personal relationship. So I see. It's a question of social relationships here." So many of us have felt, "Oh! Then maybe I solve this through adjusting my present relationships. So that's it! Maybe if I spend more time with other people who want to be close to God too, or who are close to God, I can hope and expect I will feel closer to him myself."

So often we think the thing to do is to join some group of people who are talking about God a bit, or discussing him, or maybe join a church like this one we're in here, or some religious community. Maybe as you get to know those people more and they obviously know God, maybe you'll somehow come to a close relationship with God yourself.

Of course, what usually happens is that friendship with these other people, or your preoccupation with the other members of the community, usually succeeds in distracting you for a few years from your concern with your relationship with God. You pass a number of years in that kind of "social relationship syndrome", and then you realize, "But I'm no closer to God than I was when I started." You realize, "No, it hasn't done me any good." And by that time some of us get kind of cynical and hopeless and despairing about it. We decide, "Oh, none of the rest seem to have a close relationship with the Person who made them. So maybe it isn't possible!"

Now, loved ones, that's the first thing God says to us through the verse that we're studying today. It says that a community can't know God. Romans 11:7a: "What then? Israel failed to obtain what it sought." Israel was seeking the same thing that we are talking about -- wanting to be right with God and wanting to be close to him. And God uses Paul to say that Israel failed to obtain what it sought. Because -- God can't love Israel. God doesn't love "its". He hasn't a relationship with communities.

Now, I agree with you, God used Israel as the community in which his Son would be born. But the only way Israel could have a relationship with God was if its individual members had relationships with God. That's it. God doesn't have relationships with communities. God only has relationships with people -- with individuals.

It's true here in this church. You can kind of think, "Maybe if I get into the activities of this group, or if I came and attend some of these classes, or maybe if I give money to this place, or maybe if I just take part in things more -- somehow I'll come into a closer relationship with God."

Loved ones, you won't. All those things might help you, and might show you other people who have relationships with God, and give you an idea of how they came into it. But finally, you have to set up your own relationship with God. Every one of us has to set up an individual personal relationship with God.

Do you know? God doesn't particularly care about Campus Church {the church Rev. O'Neill pastored when this talk was given}. Really! We should be glad of that, and not be all offended. God doesn't particularly care about Campus Church. Why? Because in 50 or 60 years, it will be the opposite of what it started out to be. It will be like so many communities that start out idealistically. But God DOES care about you, and you (pointing to people in the audience), and me, and you. He cares about each one of us in the world. Our God is concerned to have a relationship with us. So, you'll never get a relationship with God by thinking that you will somehow be identified with a group that knows him.

Loved ones, that's deceptive. You are no safer in a group than out of a group. You have to get to know God personally yourself. You'll never get to know him just because of this group per se. People in the group might talk to you about their experiences, and that might help you, but the group itself won't draw you nearer to God. It is important to see that it is good for us to travel along together, but each of us individually has to get right with God ourselves.

Now maybe I could share with you another thing that we do that God mentions in this verse. Many of us say, "All right. I see that just being part of a group doesn't necessarily bring me closer to God. I see that I have to deal with him myself. All right. I'm not very like him. I can see that. I have dishonesty in my life. I do lie. I am untrustworthy at times. I am hypocritical at times. I see that I am not the kind of person that God would like, and I am certainly not the kind of person that he would like to live with forever. Indeed, often I am the kind of person that he has destroyed in past years. I see too that if you are going to have any relationship with God, it's supposed to be through his Son Jesus. I see that's always mentioned."

And then, we take the next fatal step. We say, "I'll just have to try to get into Jesus." We conclude that trying to get into Jesus means trying to improve ourselves. We set out on the great self-improvement campaign -- the great salvation-by-works syndrome. We determine, "Yes. We'll try to make ourselves better so that we can be in Jesus -- because obviously I can't be in Jesus as I am, because he's pure and I'm impure. He's holy and I'm unholy. So I'll have to try to make myself like Jesus. I'll have to become better."

That's the way we feel about it. We feel, "We have to do this. We have to determine what things in our life have to be changed, and we have to determine how to get them changed." So we determine we will do what we think we should do, and we'll try to do it by our own power.

Do you see that those two qualities are the very attributes of the sin of distrust that got us into the mess in the first place? The heart of sin, or independence of God is: "I'm going to do what I think I should do, and I'm going to do it by my own power" -- instead of concentrating on what God would want me to do and trusting him to give me the power to do it. And so we set about a great self-improvement campaign that has as its heart -- sin! That is, the desire to do what we think we should do -- and to do it by our own power.

I know that we all say, "But we're trying to do what we think is good." That doesn't matter. It's still us being the initiators. It's still us taking the place of the great God who originated all the protons and neutrons. It's still setting ourselves up and saying, "This is what I think I should do -- in order to become acceptable to my Creator." Then we say, "I am going to do it by whatever power and ability I have myself."

So we compound our sin. We know that we get angry, because we see something going outside our control, and we think we know how to get it back into our control. And we use our own power to do it -- then we lose our temper. And we expect everyone to quake and tremble and fade back. But anger comes about that way, doesn't it? Anger is our method of bringing things back into our control. And do see how we hope to get rid of that anger? We hope to get rid of it by doing what we think we should do with it, and by somehow overcoming it with our own power.

Loved ones, that's compounding our sin. And do you know what we end up doing? We end up dealing with the sins in our lives that aren't really the vital ones that are keeping us away from God. That's right! In these self-improvement campaigns that we undertake, on these salvation-by-works syndromes

that we get involved in -- we deal with only the things in our lives that are not keeping us away from God. We deal normally with the things that we think we'll be able to overcome. We deal with the things that we think would be convenient for us to overcome. But we don't really deal with the things that cross God's will. We don't really deal with the sins where our will crosses God's will. We deal just with the sins that aren't really the problem at all.

It's a bit like the family where the husband does several things that really wear the poor wife out -- that just irritates her to death. He decides, "She's angry with me or upset with me in some way. I know -- I'll bring her flowers." So -- he brings her flowers. And that doesn't seem to settle the thing. Then he thinks, "What on earth is wrong with that woman?" Then he decides, "It's the wrong kind of flowers. Tomorrow I'll try tulips!" So he brings tulips. After about five different kinds of flowers, he decides, "She's no better. She just doesn't appreciate me -- that's what's wrong!" Then after a few weeks he thinks, "Maybe I should take her out to dinner a little more often." So he takes her out to dinner.

He goes through all kinds of motions that are very good things to do. But they're not dealing with the real issue that makes that dear wife feel so alienated from her husband. Usually it's something to do with sensitivity. Usually it's some little attitude that the husband is absolutely oblivious to.

Do you see what happens? The more that kind of play-acting goes on, the harder they become towards one another. The hearts get hardened. The wife loses any hope that her husband will ever know her or understand her at all, and she begins to commit herself to just living with that. "Well, this is a man. This is what they all put up with. I'll put up with it!" He decides, "This is an absolutely chaotic, unbelievably, unpleasable woman! And I cannot do anything with her!" He decides, "I'll withdraw into my shell. I'll harden my heart." So they just begin to walk parallel beside each other. "Never the twain shall meet."

The reason is, of course, the guy is involved in all kinds of good acts -- except that they're nothing to do with the things that are separating him from his wife. The strange thing is -- the same takes place with each one of us in regard to God. It's mentioned by Paul in Romans 11:7 -- the last clause of the verse: "but the rest were hardened."

That's what happens to us. On our self-improvement campaigns and our salvation-by-works syndrome, we get harder and harder towards God. I don't know if you've noticed it, but your own religion becomes more sterile and more dead. Your heart begins to be hard. You believe in God and you want to be close to him, and you are doing all sorts of good things to please him, but you don't feel any of the fragrance or the sweet liveliness of his life coming through to you. Your religion becomes more and more one of hard works and more of sterile duties.

In fact, the Greek word for hardening means 'petrification'; your heart becomes stone. You don't feel anymore. You can't sense any more what God wants. You can't sense anymore the sweetness of his presence or the lack of his presence. You become more and more just a robot who keeps going on at the things that you think you should do.

Loved ones, the problem is that you have devised your own plan of salvation -- instead of taking part in God's plan. This verse says, "The elect obtained it." Israel did not obtain what she sought. The rest were hardened who indulged themselves in this legalism -- and the elect obtained it. The elect are not those who themselves choose what needed changing in themselves, or choose their own way of

becoming like God. The elect are those whom God chooses because they in turn have accepted HIS plan for restoring the relationship that they have lost with him.

The plan is very simple. The first part of it is that God initiates it. It's his plan. He is the God. He knows what has to be fixed in each one of our lives. He's the one that initiates it. The first thing you have to see is that you can't become like God. You can't restore your relationship with God. If God doesn't want to restore his relationship with you, then you can't do anything about it. The first step is: God initiates the plan.

The second step is that God has done that. He sees each one of us, and he knows exactly the attitude in you and the attitude in me. It's different for each one of us -- the thing that separate us from him. He knows what it is! With you (pointing), it's an indolence. You've got used to an indolence -- a laziness in your life. With you, it's a lack of absolute honesty in business. With you, it's a tendency to tell white lies. With you, it's being sarcastic. God knows what these things are.

Besides those important issues, you have about 20,000 others that could distract you for the rest of your life if you wanted to hand them all down. But God knows the one that you need to be dealt with about at this time. That's the one that expresses distrust of him in your life. He has put that part of your personality into his Son Jesus, and he has destroyed that old, selfish, perverted part of your personality in his Son in a cosmic death that was expressed in our space-time world at Calvary. He has recreated your personality absolutely new in Jesus' resurrection. God has done that.

The third step is: you have to accept that. You have to believe that that is what happened. The fourth step is: you have to obey whatever the Holy Spirit tells you to do, because he alone can actualize in your life the deliverance from your self and your sin that God worked in Jesus. All you can do is listen to the Holy Spirit -- and do immediately what he tells you.

Loved ones, that's the only hope. It's no use you looking at all kinds of other shortcomings you have, and all kinds of other sins, and improving the little things that don't bother you much anyway. If you want to really be right with your God and your Creator, you have to start going to him this morning and saying, "Lord, you've obviously done something to me in Jesus that I need done here in this present experience that I am having. Now Lord, what have I to be willing to change?" And then, the moment God through your conscience tells you, you have to act on that.

I tell you, that dear wife and husband are finished in their relationship if the wife says sometime to the husband, "You know -- it's the off-hand way you speak to me. That's why I feel that you don't love me. You just toss off a comment to me without thinking of me at all." Once she's said that, if that husband doesn't respond to that, that marriage is finished. Because she decides, "He doesn't really love me at all."

Now do you see? It's the same with God. If you know this morning that God has spoken to your conscience and has shown you something in your life that he wants to change -- then you have to immediately do your part -- and will to change it. Why? Because his power will only be made available to you when you've done all that you can do to change the thing. It's not just a matter of sitting back and saying, "I'm willing. Change it." It's you actively willing to change whatever habit that is in your life. Then God makes available to you the power of the deliverance that he worked in Jesus on Calvary.

But brothers and sisters, I tell you this -- I know this for certain through my own experience: if

you don't change that thing, you will have no relationship with your Maker. Your heart will go on getting harder and harder. You can sing in the choir, or read your Bible, or do all kinds of nice things. You can improve all kinds of other things. But unless you deal with the thing that God is convicting you about, he will take it for granted that you have no real interest in a relationship with him.

It is surprisingly simple. If the reason that I don't like you is because you're kicking my dog every day, you can improve all kinds of other things. You can give me all kinds of presents. You can say all kinds of nice things to me -- but if you're still kicking that poor old dog, there will be no relationship between us. Finally, you have to stop kicking the dog.

So it is in your life and in mine. In our lives, however far we are on with God, or however far back we are, God's spirit as we have been talking together here has spoken to your conscience. You know that there are some things that you need to change. Don't sit there and say, "I would love to change them -- but I can't." That's why Jesus died on Calvary. God put you into his Son and changed you there, so you CAN change them -- if you WILL to change them. His power becomes available to make up whatever deficiency that you have.

So do you see what it is? That being right with God is just being honest with your God. Instead of running your own plan to get to know a certain society or community that will help you to be closer to God; instead of working out your own salvation-by-works system whereby you're going to go on a self-improvement campaign -- see that God has already changed you in his Son on Calvary -- and he now wants to let you know which parts of that change he wants to actualize in you today.

There will be different things tomorrow, and the next day. But that's how you come into a relationship with him. Then you'll begin to sense a closeness to God. His Spirit will begin to make you feel close to him. You know how that works. You know what it is to be in a room with your dearest friend whom you've just offended, and you feel miles apart. And then to be in that room when everything's settled, and you know the peace and the quietness, and the sense of contentment that there is between you. That's what will happen this very day, if you will simply set your will with God's will on that issue. God will make real in you what he has worked upon you in Jesus.

I pray that somebody will do it. I would pray that all of you would make that change at this moment, whatever it is -- whether it is in regard to your prayer life or your sexual life or your business life or your study life. Do it now. Make a change now.

Let us pray. Dear Father, we know that you're a real and a straight person, and that you're the very spirit of honesty. We see, our Father, that we're just playing games with you. So often we've felt our hearts are getting harder every day. So often we've felt almost an insensitivity towards you or anything about you. We see, Lord, that it's because we've wanted to hold onto these darling sins that you have pointed out to us a thousand times. We're trying to throw up a smoke screen with all kinds of other good works that we're doing. Father, we see that the only way to a relationship with you is to stop offending you. Stop throwing mud in your face and stop piercing your dear Son with another sword. Lord, we see that you are asking us today to stop this thing.

Lord, we would commit ourselves to stopping. We would stop whatever the cost. Whether it means that we will lose friends. Whether it means we will lose happiness. We will stop this now. Lord, we ask you to recreate our sense of relationship with you again. Build the bridge again between us so that we again feel your dear heart beating, and again begin to know what you're thinking and feeling.

Lord, we commit ourselves to you so that you can do that in us this day, for your glory. Amen.