

Salvation by Works

Romans 11:9

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I would like to describe to you a classic comparison that all of us have thought of at least one time or another. It's the contrast that our parents have drawn if we haven't drawn it. It's the contrast between a family that existed during the Depression years and a family that exists today.

You know the way the comparison goes. The American family of the Depression days is something like "Little House on the Prairie" (an American television program), because they don't have much money. The mom spends a lot of time repairing clothes for the children and the husband. The husband spends a lot of time earning a mere pittance to keep the family together. A lot of time is spent making as much of the little food that they have as they possibly can.

And yet they do spend the evenings together, and they go on picnics together. As the mom and dad tuck the children up in bed, there's a great sense that the most important thing in the home is their love for one another. And there's a great feeling and confidence and trust that the most important thing in each of their hearts is each other, and their concern for each other.

And then you know the way we describe the typical American family of today. There are two cars in the garage, two color TV sets, and great summer vacations. There are new clothes whenever they are needed and beautiful bedrooms for the children. And yet, nobody seems to spend much time with each other.

Indeed, there's a great sense of distance from each other. The parents often have unresolved problems and differences that separate them permanently. The father often feels he doesn't quite understand the children. The children often feel that they are not really loved in a deep way. Often there's a lack of that inner bond that existed in the Depression family, that inner bond of confidence and trust that their love for each other matters more than everything else. There's a lack of that sense that love for each other matters more than the success of the dad at the job, and more than the success of the children in Little League. There's often a lack of that sense that love for each other matters the most.

Now – it's a generalization, and many of you who lived in the Depression know families that weren't like that. Many of us know families today who aren't like the contemporary one we described. But there are enough elements in it, loved ones, to illustrate the truth that our Creator wants to share with us today. There are enough elements of reality in that comparison for us to use it so that God will show us a deep truth that affects every one of our lives.

The fact is, many of us realize that our homes and our families are not right. Many of the moms and dads feel that there's something not right about their relationship to each other and about their relationship to the children. And there are many of us today, who therefore grab at everything we can that would help us to express the real qualities of a true relationship with each other: of good family life, of good life between roommates, of good friendship between colleagues.

So we listen to everything that we can hear. We listen to all the sermons we can listen to. We read all the books we can read. We read everything and watch everything that would suggest to us the

qualities that there ought to be in a real love relationship – be it be between friends who are guys, or friends who are girls, or guy and girl, or mom and dad, or father and child. We read anything. We'll read even bumper stickers.

And now we begin to get into the problem. The dear old dad sits behind the wheel on the freeway at five o'clock. You stop and you stop. He's wondering what to do about the alienation between himself and his son, and suddenly there it is: HAVE YOU HUGGED YOUR KID TODAY? And he looks at it and he says, "That's it! I need to show him love. I need to show him that I care for him. So when I get home today, one hug coming up!" Or he's walking through the skyway and he sees in the florist's window: "BRING HER HOME FLOWERS TONIGHT". And he says, "That's what I need to do! I need to show her that I appreciate her."

Or he gets closer to home, and he sees it there on the billboard that reads: THE FAMILY THAT PRAYS TOGETHER (if it's a church) EATS TOGETHER (if it's Perkins {an American restaurant}) PLAYS TOGETHER (if it's the Sports and Health Club) STAYS TOGETHER. And he thinks, "That's it! We ought to do more things together as a family. That's what is needed. We need to do more things together and that will get love into our home."

The tragedy is that the little guy knows the difference between an obligation hug and a real hug. We are so created by our Creator that even a little three-year-old guy knows the difference between a real hug that has love behind it and an unselfish heart that cares for the other whatever it costs himself. He knows the difference between a real hug and an obligation hug.

The truth is that there is an intuitive sense in the wife's conscience that reveals to her whether the flowers are given to cover up a wandering eye and an ulterior motive, or whether they express the fragrance of an unreserved commitment and an absolute love. The interesting thing about us human beings is that we have some sixth sense deep down (really, it's our conscience) that shows us whether the family outings take place in order to keep the family together, or whether they take place because they're an expression of the delight and the enjoyment that we have in each other above everything else that concerns our lives. It's very interesting that we human beings have something inside us that makes it clear whether we're all playing games or not.

Yet the tragedy is that our society is full of these games. It's full of ways to encourage personal achievement and industry by valedictorian recognition or by keys to the executive washroom. It's full of ways to encourage a sense of identity and of importance by giving people a place on a team, or by giving them certain strokes that will make them feel good. It's full of ways to reward the good worker and to punish the bad worker. It's full of ways to make people good wives or good husbands.

We are involved in all kinds of techniques that actually originally were the expression of unselfish love. But our society prostitutes these expressions of unselfish love for its own purposes, in order to make it successful or in order to hold us together as a society. But above all, all these techniques and tricks that we use with each other are simply techniques, and they spring from a selfish heart. And for that reason, even though our society and our homes and our schools and our companies are filled with all the works of love, are filled with all the things that spring from unselfish love – yet all they are is a technique that is used to get better productivity from people or to get people to stay in the positions they are in.

So there is a great lack of love in our society. There is a terrible lack of love in our families.

There is a terrible lack of love in our schools. Even though our society seems to do all the things that show love, yet the unselfish heart of love is absent.

And so here, there, and everywhere throughout society there are little hearts that are cold and lonely, from executive offices to little home kitchens, from faculty rooms to kindergarten classrooms. There are dear little hearts that are lonely and cold, and feel that no one really loves them, as people used to love in the Depression family that we talked of.

Now, loved ones, that is what this verse means that we are studying today. Look at it and I will explain it to you. Romans 11:9. It's a hard verse but you will see more and more clearly the meaning of it. "And David says, 'Let their table' (and their table is what we live off -- the food that we eat, the things that nourish us, the things that actually keep us going, the things that give us the appearance of prosperity and health that we have -- in other words, those things that we talked about. Those techniques and those tricks that we're involved in, the giving each other a reward, the bringing flowers home when it doesn't really express an unselfish heart, the little techniques that we use to make each other feel good and to pretend that there is love, those works of love without the love) 'Let their table become a snare.'

And that's what happens. Those techniques that we practice for having a good marriage without the real love underneath. Those become a snare to us. They catch us. The verse continues, "and a trap'." "Ferra" is the word and it really means a "hunting net." We become caught in the meshes of our own techniques – so that today in society, the big doubt we have is whether a person really means the love that they appear to be showing us. So it's become a hunting net.

We manipulate and we use love or the tricks or the techniques in order to get people to do things. So it becomes a hunting net in which we are caught in eternal meshes, so that one of the great doubts today is self-doubt, a sense of identity, a great sense of loneliness. These things come because we wonder if people really love us or are they are just manipulating us again as we manipulate others. The verse finishes with, "a pitfall." The Greek word is "skandalon" and it means not just "a trap" but "the trigger that sets off the trap" that catches us.

These techniques that we have used with each other set off the trap of isolation and loneliness and self-doubt and problems with identity that catch most of us – the personal frustration that most of us feel. These very things that we do with each other set off the trap that catches us and kills us, and are retribution for them. We're so busy reading how to have a good marriage and how to make each other happy physically and emotionally, that we become preoccupied with that, and that becomes our retribution, our recompenses, our reward.

The fact that we have done the thing right -- we have kissed right, or we have spoken with the right tone of voice, or we have given the right present -- that becomes our only recompense. Suddenly life is like a soap bubble that bursts, and all you're left with is the feeling of dampness -- nothing beautiful, nothing real, but just the coldness and the emptiness of life. Loved ones, that is what this verse means.

You may feel as I do, "Well, I know that. I know that's our predicament. I've felt it often in my family. I know I've felt it often at my work. I know I've often felt it in school. I know I've often felt it with friends. I've often felt that sense of coldness and isolation in spite of the fact that we're all supposedly doing the right thing to each other."

"But what do I do? I know my heart is filled with selfish motives. I know my heart is all twisted up. But what can I do about it? I know the problem is the heart. I'm doing the things that express love because I am supposed to do them. They're works of law to me! They're salvation by works. They're not things that spring from my heart. They're things that I've read in books, on bumper stickers, and on shop windows. They're things that other people tell me I should do. I know they don't spring from my heart. What do I do?"

Loved ones, a Jewish philosopher called Martin Buber pointed to the beginnings of a real analysis of the problem -- not only our problem -- but the problem of the Jewish people -- when he said we all were created by God to have an I-Thou relationship with him -- two persons relating to each other. This would then enable us to have an I-Thou relationship with each other.

You see, I and thou are two personal pronouns. That was God's plan. That is the only thing that will finally give us satisfaction. But he said that we have perverted our relationship with God into an I-It relationship, so that as a result, our relationships with each other have become I-It relationships.

I related to It—the flowers that will please her. I related to It -- the hug that will express that I love him. I related to It -- the picnic or outing that will suggest to the family that we are really together. I related to It -- the famous gold watch that is supposed to express to someone who has given their whole life to a company that we in some way care about them or appreciate them.

We have perverted life that is supposed to be an I-Thou relationship into an I-It relationship, so that we see the It but not the Thou. We are preoccupied with the flowers, not the Thou. We are preoccupied with the reward -- not the Thou.

What we're all dying for is a personal heart who really loves us and doesn't just give us an expression of love. That's the truth – that real love has to come from an unselfish heart that cares more about the other person than it cares about itself. If you don't have an unselfish heart all you're involved in is works of law. You're involved in trying to do the things that express a love that isn't really there because it can't be there.

Now that was the problem with the Jewish nation. This verse was first spoken by David in regards to the Jewish nation. That's what the Jewish nation did. They were the first people in our world that our Creator introduced himself to, the first people that he revealed himself to as a God whom they could trust and obey and love, and who would be to them a loving Father. And they as a nation decided that they didn't want God as the God of their lives and their own lives and their own destinies. So they sidestepped the I-Thou relationship and they began to set about running their lives for themselves in their own way.

As a result of course, their conscience began to work overtime! And pointed out to them that they're not living the way they were meant to live if you had an I-Thou relationship. God said to them, "Listen. If you trust me as a dear Father, and if you live your life the way I've planned for you to live it -- you'll have so much love and assurance of security from me that you won't need to steal or covet other people's things. You'll have such enjoyment with me in our personal relationship you won't need to commit adultery in order to enjoy yourself. You'll have such a sense of how much I love you and how important you are to me that you won't have to bear false witness against your neighbor in order to make yourself feel important." And of course, the conscience of the Jewish nation began to show them that, "You're not living this way."

Do you know what they did? They said, "Well, we don't want an I-Thou relationship, but we do have to do something to make our conscience feel comfortable. So, all right! We'll hug our kid today. We'll try to avoid committing adultery. We'll fill our lives with the marks of an I-Thou relationship – even though we don't have an I-Thou relationship. We'll avoid stealing. We'll avoid coveting. We'll bring her home flowers tonight. We'll do the things that real love would produce if it were there; but meanwhile, we don't want anything to do with this God."

And so the Jewish nation sank into a mental preoccupation with obeying laws. Instead of entering into all the joy of a personal, intimate loving relationship with God who is their Father, they entered an I-It relationship -- related to the "its" of what would have been a good trusting relationship with God. I related to "thou shalt not steal." I related to "thou shalt not covet." I related to "thou shalt not bear false witness." And so the Jewish nation sank into an experience of personal frustration and a mental preoccupation with legalism. Even to this very day, that is their situation.

But loved ones, many of us here are in the same situation. Many of here know fine well that what we need is to have our heart changed. We know that we've perverted our personalities by this preoccupation with things and with "it" instead of with persons. We know that we have a heart that is such a mess that it can hardly catch a glimpse of what an intimate, trusting, loving relationship with our God is. We know it has to be changed.

We know, actually, that that's what happened on Calvary. God changed our hearts in Jesus. Romans 6:6 tells us that our old self, our old twisted heart, preoccupied with things and "it", was crucified so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin. All of us were changed in the cosmic death of Jesus that was expressed in temporal events at Calvary.

We were changed! Our hearts are changed in Jesus. We can have the new heart this moment if we submit to him; if we believe that he was crucified and we were crucified with him, and there is a new "us" available; and submit to his Holy Spirit to show us what needs to be changed in our attitude for that new heart to become real. If we do these things, then there's a new life that comes within us. If we identify ourselves with Jesus in dying to ourselves as he did, then the Spirit of God brings a new heart to us and changes our selfish hearts into unselfish hearts.

But many of us who know that here today have sidestepped that I-Thou relationship with the man on the cross, and we along with countless evangelicals have perverted Jesus' death and John 3:16 into a mantra. That's right! We've perverted it into a mantra, or a formula by which we hope to argue ourselves into heaven.

Instead of seeing it as an experience that we are to embrace; instead of seeing Jesus' death as something that we were involved in in eternity and that we have to enter into today, dying to the same things that he died to --to his right to everybody making much of him, to his right to be loved, to his right to have things comfortable and easy -- instead of entering into it with our whole beings and becoming identified with Jesus in his death to himself and in his rising to God and to other people -- we have made John 3:16 a mantra. We keep repeating, "I'm going to heaven because Jesus died for me, I'm going to heaven because Jesus died for me."

Meanwhile, it is an I-It relationship we are entering into. I related to It -- the concept of John 3:16; I related to It -- the death of Jesus on the cross; I related to a belief, instead of I

related to a dear person who hung on the cross. This is instead of I relating to him and embracing him, and saying, "Lord, if that is where I am to be changed -- then I want to be part of that with you. Show me what my death with you means to me today. Show me what I've to surrender to you so that you can make that real in me today." Instead, we use Jesus' death as some kind of admission ticket into heaven.

Do you know the strange thing? The things that normally follow a full identification with Jesus -- the new unselfish heart that produces a love for God's word, a love for prayer, and a desire to tell others about it in witnessing -- these things become a heavy burden to those of us who use Jesus' death as a mantra. So we become preoccupied in our so-called Christian lives with our prayer life and the fact that it doesn't exist; with our Bible study life and the fact that it doesn't exist; with our witnessing life and the fact that it is unsatisfactory.

What is meant to be an I-Thou relationship with our dear Savior on the cross and, therefore, a life of joy that loves to tell others about it, and that loves to meet with him every day and receive from his word life and enjoyment and love -- those very things becomes an It or works of law that simply take the place of the Ten Commandments that the Jews had.

Now, loved ones, are you in that situation? Are those things that are normally an expression of an unselfish heart that is identified with Jesus -- prayer, reading the Bible, witnessing -- are those things a burden to you? Are you always making new resolutions about them? Well, do you see that you're treating them the way that the Jews treated the Ten Commandments? Your problem with those is a snare. It's a hunting net. It's a trap trigger -- in order to make you aware that there's a better relationship!

That's why God put these here. He didn't put the snare there to kill us. He didn't put the trap trigger there to kill us. He built us this way so that we would feel the emptiness and the legalism that fills our lives, and we would realize there's something more at that Calvary place that we have not entered into. And we need to enter into it with all our hearts. That's why it's there. It's there not for your harm but for your good.

So I would just ask you -- have you an I-It relationship with Jesus and his death? Or have you an I-Thou relationship with the dear savior who included you in himself when he allowed himself to be crucified and raised anew?

You know best. If you suspect that it's an I-It relationship, then you can spend a little time praying, and just say to Jesus, "Lord Jesus, I think I know very little about you, from the sound of these words -- very little about being identified with you in your death. It's just words to me at the moment. But Lord, by your Holy Spirit, will you begin to show me how to enter into this so that my life will be filled with works of faith and not works of law? So that I will be involved in salvation by grace and not salvation by works?" I would do that, and he will be faithful to you as he was to me. His Spirit will reveal to you things in your life today and over the next days that will make it clearer to you how to become one with him in his death and resurrection.

And then loved ones, I tell you: that is the new birth. That is life eternal -- to truly know God and him whom he hath sent, even Jesus Christ. Not to know about them, which is an I-It relationship, but to know them personally, which is a personal relationship.

