

The Apostolic Ministry

Romans 11:13

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Loved ones, would you turn to Romans 11:13: "Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry." God always guides us to these verses, so he has something to say to us through them. So that is what I'd say to you this morning: "Now I'm speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry."

You might say, "Do you claim to be an apostle?" Well, not in the same sense as the twelve disciples of Jesus were apostles. But in the same sense as Paul and Barnabas and other men in the New Testament were apostles – because the name came to be applied to all those men who had an encounter with Jesus and whose ministry God honored with spiritual conversions. So I would claim to be an apostle. *Apostello* in the Greek means "send". I would claim that -- to be a man who is sent to you by God, who did not choose nor am I able to bring about the things that have taken place among us. But I've done what Jesus gave me a sense that I should do.

Yet I don't know about you – but I am always uncomfortable with that kind of claim. It doesn't matter who it is, but when one of us little human beings gets up on his hind legs and starts claiming to be God's messenger to us, I always feel just a little uneasy. I suppose partly because in my own mind, so many disasters and catastrophes have taken place on the basis of some dear happy soul's megalomania and claims to be God's messenger.

I suppose I am not too happy with a Jim Jones who claims he's God's messenger to us, or a Joseph Smith who claims he's God's messenger to us, or anybody else -- even if he's Irish! I think that it's pretty dangerous to accept him just because he claims it. It seems to me there needs to be some criteria by which we can judge a man's apostleship quite apart from his own personal claims.

That's why I would say to you what Paul says at the end of that verse -- "Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am an apostle to you Gentiles, I magnify -- not me. I magnify my ministry." That's what I'd say this morning. Not me, a poor little worm who is far more useless than he appears to be here. Not magnify a person -- not one of us is worthy to be magnified, but magnify the ministry that God has given.

The ministry is *diakonia* in Greek, and it means service to God, or the particular form of attendance upon him which he has appointed for me in this life here on earth. My diaconate. You are a welder or you're a secretary. That's your "diaconate". That's your service to God. You're a nurse or you're a teacher. That's your diaconate to God.

So this is my diaconate, and I would magnify it, in the sense of putting it under microscopic examination and looking at it. That I think is the way to find out if an apostleship is in the pattern of Jesus and of his own disciples.

It is so good that we can do it! It's so good that we're not dependent on a man's own claims or a woman's own claims about this kind of thing. We have in the Bible plain criteria that are objective, that indicate to us whether the preaching that we're listening to, or the apostleship that we're receiving, is scriptural -- or whether it isn't. It says in this book, "they continued in the

apostles' doctrine, in the breaking of bread and prayers." It's so good to be able to look at the apostles' doctrine here, to see what they preached and see what they shared -- and see -- are we in that apostolic line?

Of course I would share with you: Forget me. Forget all of us here in Campus Church. It is just very important in these days, when so many men and women are claiming to speak for Jesus and claiming to preach God's gospel -- it's very important that all of us are able to examine each person's diaconate or each person's apostleship, and tell on our own knowledge and our convictions whether it is true and real or not. So it is important to do that, loved ones.

This is why the main thrust of our sharing every Sunday is that most of us in this world are wildcatting. We are. That's the main thrust of our sharing every Sunday. Most of us are wildcatting in our lives. We're wildcats. We run our lives, independent of the dear God that gave them to us. In fact, if space itself operated the way we do, it would be one massive traffic jam -- and it's because we're wildcatting that we're always colliding with each other. If that happened in space, it would be filled with explosions every moment. But just as God in his love has set certain orbits for Venus, Mars, and for the moon and the earth, just as he's set certain bounds for the Atlantic and the Pacific, so he's set certain orbits for you and me.

We wildcat out of those orbits. We just operate our lives in our own way, independent of his plan for us. In other words, most of us in this world get up each morning, make our plans for the day, eat breakfast, make our purchases, perform in the office or at work, plan our recreation in the evening and go to bed at night -- according to certain pressures that are exerted upon us by our companies, by our relatives, or by the people we work with. But very few of us run our day-by-day lives according to a personal sense of what our dear Father wants us to do each moment. Very few of us do that.

Most of us run our lives by pressures from all kinds of other people and all kinds of other things, but not from a personal sense of pleasing God or fulfilling his plan for us. In other words, most of us live lives that are independent of him. In fact, most of us treat God as if we are God. We really do! Most of us treat God as if we are the rulers of our own lives. Most of us do what we want when we want, for our own self-gratification. That's the way we live day by day.

Now that's sin. It's independence of God. It's not living in a close friendship with our dear Father. It's allowing our lives to be dictated by our own whimsical preferences or by the pressures of the society around us. But that's sin, loved ones. That's what the apostles and Jesus attacked constantly. That's what I'll attack here in this place as long as it's possible to be in this place. Because that's our problem -- sin.

Our problem is not that we don't know that God loves us. It's very interesting! If you read what the apostles preached, they didn't preach a lot about God's love. It is strange. We all think of John's gospel because it's the great gospel of love. But the apostles did not preach all the time about God's love. They didn't preach all the time about our need to realize that God loves us. They didn't!

They preached all the time about the fact that we wanted God's love without his rulership of our lives, and that God refuses that, and that he lets us know we're wrong through our guilty consciences, and through our inability to sense his love in our hearts, and through our fear of death and our fear of dark loneliness. Through all those things God is getting to us the fact that,

“You want my love, but don't want my rulership over your life.”

That's what the apostles hit time after time. They were always saying, "All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." They were always saying, "The wages of sin is death." They were always saying, "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Loved ones, the first and the most important thing for us to share with each other is that we have an independent attitude in us that wants to live its life independent of God, and that's what the Holy Spirit convicts us of.

It's the thing that Paul emphasizes in Galatians very strongly and of course to our discomfiture. It's Galatians 5:19: "Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

It's interesting that the Holy Spirit is so good. He doesn't just nail us for individual things. But he gives us a sense in our hearts -- do we reject that word? That very word there. Do we argue with it? Or do we respond with a penitent heart? -- saying "Yes! Some of those things are in my life. I don't want them, and in the sense that they're in my life, I'm wrong!" Is that our response?

That's what the Holy Spirit convicts us of. When the Holy Spirit comes, he convicts us of sin. He doesn't get us arguing about, "Well I have a little envy," or, "I have a little dissension." He gets to our hearts and says, "Yes, but on the whole, do you resent that? Do you resent that somebody is saying this to you? Or on the whole, are you glad that they're saying it to you, because you're anxious to get deeper into Jesus so that you're absolutely free from all these things?" So it's interesting that the apostles in the New Testament are always hitting at the inner attitude.

Loved ones, that's why we don't talk a lot about individual sins -- whether it's a sin to dance or to drink or all that kind of thing, even regarding abortion, and I'm sure it's important to speak out on those things. But even those things are not the big things! The big thing that the Holy Spirit always convicts of, and that the apostles always speak to, is this very civilized, noble independence of God that governs so many of our attitudes.

Of course, the apostles say that sin itself is a power in the world. That's why I've shared with you so often: loved ones, it's not just doing wrong! It's not. Sin itself is a power in the world. There's the Spirit of God. That's a power. You can live by the Spirit of God. Or you can live by sin. Sin is a power. It's a whole system of satisfaction that enables you to live in God's world while disobeying him. That's it!

Sin is a power. It's a force inside the world, that is set on making it possible for us to live in the world, disobeying God, and yet being tolerably happy.

That's why the apostles say that it is impossible for us to escape from it. They say, "The good that I would I cannot do. The very thing I want to do -- that's the thing I can't! The thing that I hate -- that's the thing I do. Woe is me! Wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of sin? If I find that I do what I do not want, then it is no longer I that do it, but it's sin that dwells within me."

So loved ones, that's why I share with you that sin is not something you can get rid of yourself. It

isn't. Sin is a power in this world that deceives us constantly. It's a compulsive force that constantly tries to make us think we're all right.

That's why the apostles never say, "If you speak in tongues you'll be okay." Because the apostles knew that there would be all kinds of false prophets and false spirits that would try to make people feel, "You can power your way out of sin -- by speaking in tongues! Or by establishing your value in other people's eyes. Or you can power your way out of sin, by thinking positively about your own life. Or you can power your way out of sin, by getting into a nice fellowship of people!"

Loved ones, the apostles knew that sin itself was a deceptive power, and there was no way out of sin -- except God's way. That's why they always were so boring. They were! I'll show you what Paul said. He was desperately boring. (I'm certainly glad that we don't do this kind of thing!)

1 Corinthians 2:2 "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Boy -- I wouldn't like to listen to that Sunday after Sunday! But loved ones, that's it -- because the only way out of sin is that dear cross of Jesus. That's the only way out.

We'll wear ourselves out trying to control our own wills. We'll wear ourselves out trying to get rid of our own envy and anger and jealousy ourselves. The fact is that in Jesus' death God was expressing in physical form a massive recreation of each one of us that took place in Jesus in timeless eternity. That's it.

God did a work in Jesus that has changed all of us. That's why the cross is the only way out of sin. It's the only way to be freed from this subtle power that tries to make us live in disobedience and independence of our God and yet be happy doing it.

The only way to get rid of this power of sin in our lives is to come into a deep identification of ourselves with Jesus -- a deep death with him to ourselves and to the world and to other people. That's the only way to be free. That's why the apostles always said, "Our old self was crucified with Christ, so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." They said, "Who has been freed from sin? He who has died is free from sin!"

Loved ones that's why I share that with you Sunday after Sunday. It's the only way. That dear death of Jesus is the only way out of the sin in our lives. I'll tell you what happens if you don't go into that. You end up under--interpreting Jesus' death. You do. You end up preaching Jesus' death as a bribe to God to overlook the sins that we continue living in. That's right! You either have that --or the real gospel, deliverance from the power of sin -- which is why Jesus came to earth. You remember, God said to Joseph, "You'll call this little baby's name Jesus -- for he shall save his people FROM their sins."

He'll save you from sinning in your life. Not just from the consequences of your sin. Not just the punishment of your sin. Not just the lake of fire, and the outer darkness and the guilt -- but he'll save you from the power of sin in your life. "Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin." You can be freed from anger and envy and irritability and jealousy in your own life, here in this present life.

That's what God told his apostles to preach. Loved ones, the dear "apostles" -- so many of them that are so false today -- are preaching an untrue gospel. They're preaching the old Jewish gospel that the Jews knew. The Jews said themselves, "Blessed is that man to whom the Lord does not impute sin."

They knew forgiveness of sins. But what their hearts yearned after was to be delivered from the power of sin in their own lives.

If I could just share with you again what your dear relatives, your fellow students and your friends are thinking: "I wish you Christians would live what you say you believe." So the whole world is yearning for a body of people who will live above sin. That is why the cross of Christ is the main topic of our conversation every Sunday. That is the apostolic doctrine – that we are caught in the power of sin. That is what brings our unanswered prayers. That is what brings our erratic career lives. That is what brings our failures in our families.

It's not that we're primarily disintegrated individuals. It's not primarily that we need to know more about God's love. It's not primarily that we need people to praise us more. It's not primarily that we need a better environment. It's that we need to be free from sin. Sin is the cause of all the problems in our lives -- honestly.

I'll agree with anybody who says, "Yes! But doesn't it produce B that produces C that produces D that produces the problem?" Yes. But it is the beginning. It is the one that starts the chain off. It's sin that we need to be free from in our lives. That's way Sunday by Sunday I try to confront you with that simple truth -- repent and believe the gospel. Believe that you were crucified with Jesus. Believe that God did recreate you completely in his Son -- and repent. Change your whole way of living. Change the whole focus of your life from yourself and your friends to God. Repent. Turn your whole life around, and believe that God changed you in Jesus, and be willing to be completely remade by his Holy Spirit -- from your head to your toes. That is, I think, the apostolic gospel.

Loved ones, there's one other clear characteristic of apostolic doctrine. It's in Acts 7:54: "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him." That's it. We should thank God as long as there's grinding of teeth in this sanctuary. Really! And I speak of what I know. We should thank God – as long as your teeth grind? Yes – and as long as my teeth grind too. Because what I'm saying to you, God is saying to me.

Loved ones, that's apostolic preaching. Apostolic preaching is not buttering everybody up. It's not preaching the power of positive thinking. It's not me -- a miserable little human being, trying to make you poor miserable little human beings happy. It's not that. It's a far more glorious thing than that! Preaching in the apostolic ministry is bringing home to each one of us the ways in which we are still caught in the power of sin and independence of our God and our loving Father – and bringing home to us repeatedly Sunday after Sunday what we have to do in our own lives -- the things we have to be willing to change, to enable the mighty recreation of our whole personalities that took place in Jesus' death and resurrection to be actualized in our lives today.

So I'll be concerned when you stop grinding your teeth. That's good. Don't be worried when you grind your teeth. See that God's Spirit is lovingly but relentlessly getting at something in your lives that needs to be changed. Let's go home together and let's make the changes that are needed, so that the next Sunday we won't grind our teeth on that issue, but we'll come and see something new from the Father, and we'll come into a new wholeness with him and a new fullness.

So loved ones, I would say to you, that "I am speaking to you Gentiles. And inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I do magnify my ministry." I think we each one need to thank God, not at all for a creature – I am worse than all of you – that's nothing, it's not the being that matters -- but we need to thank God – that he is in these days giving us apostolic ministry.

Then of course, I'd just end with Luther's dear words: "On that day -- judgment day -- you will say to me, 'Hast thou heard that?' and I will say, 'Yes, but it was just the word of a country preacher. It was just the work of another human being.' Then I will say to you, 'That word was the word of God in your heart. That was God speaking to you. See thou then to it, how thou standest.'" And that's what I have to say to myself as well as to you this morning. I have done my duty before God. See thou then to it, how thou standest.

Let us pray. Dear Father, we thank you for the privilege we have of hearing scriptural doctrine given to us Sunday by Sunday. Lord, I thank you for that myself, because I don't feel it's me that does it, but you in your graciousness. So Lord, we as a congregation would come to you and thank you for that.

And Father, we see that those to whom much is given, from them much will be required. Lord, we see that we will have no excuse on that Day of Judgment, because we have heard, and we have seen, and we have been given the opportunity to join our dear savior. Lord, we would be real and honest with you these days.

And Father, when we think of today as yet another opportunity to settle things with you, we see that today is another day of salvation for us, and no one can guarantee that we will have another. So today is the day of salvation. Today is the day to seek the Lord, while he may be found. Amen.