

## God's Unconditional Gifts

Romans 11:29

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

If you look at the great majority of our dear brothers and sisters in the world, I think you will agree that most of us live here on earth as if the world just happened. It is not logical to think that and the presence of that basic illogicality at the center of our lives is what causes many of us such a sense of insecurity. But nevertheless, we live as if there was no one behind the universe but ourselves.

The Creator of the world watched for a while and then he picked out a certain group of men and women to demonstrate to the rest of us what he himself was like and what life would be like if he were a daily part of it. That group was called in the old days, the Hebrews. They were descendants of a man called Abraham. Later on they were called Israelites after his grandson whose name was changed to Israel.

Our Creator did special things for this group of people. He led them miraculously through deserts, provided unearthly bread for them to eat to sustain them, defended them from their enemies and healed their sicknesses by miracles. But these people kept on treating him the way the rest of us treat him. They kept on believing in him when it suited them, but when it didn't pay them to believe in him, they just forgot him. They served him when he gave them things and ignored him when they wanted to.

In other words, they treated him as if he wasn't there. They did their own thing repeatedly down through the centuries. Yet our Creator kept on being faithful to them right down to this present century. He kept on holding out his hands to them and continually treating them as the demonstration model that he had in mind for the whole world, however much they rebuked and repelled him. Romans 10:21 expresses his attitude even today, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

Why did he do it? Why has he continued to give this remarkable Jewish nation such a talent for survival so that kings, kingdoms, realms and dynasties have come and gone and the Jewish nation remains? Why has he continued to give this nation that has so often refused his grace and so often rebelled against him this talent for survival? Why has he continued to give them as individuals unbelievable talents; talents so that proportionately way beyond their number, they have made contributions to the worlds of art and music, science and commerce that no other nation can equal? Why does God keep giving these gifts to these people?

Loved ones, the answer is in the verse today and we believe it has great liberty for all of us. Romans 11:29: "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable." That is why.

Saul was the first king of Israel and he was just a bad king. He disobeyed God in regard to enemies like the Amalekites,, he disobeyed God by trying to communicate with the dead through the witch at Endor, yet he was king for life. God kept him king of Israel as long as he lived despite all his jealousy of David and his attempts to kill David because he thought David was to be his successor. God continued to preserve Saul from his enemies. There was one moment when David's followers wanted him to kill Saul when he found him asleep in a cave, because Saul had been trying to kill David. God

preserved Saul's life because David said, "Touch not the Lord's anointed. This man has been made king by God and he is king as long as he lives." In a sense, the call and the gifts of God are irrevocable, whatever that person has done.

Rubenstein, the great pianist, is Abraham's descendant. There is probably no other ninety year old so full of life and so active. Probably no man has such outstanding fame from the earliest years of his career as Rubenstein. Yet he admits in his own personal life history to a life of what we would call gross immorality. But the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Rubenstein is a gift of God to our world that God does not pull back however Rubenstein may treat his God or his own life. So do you see that there are certain gifts and callings in the world that are irrevocable? That is, they are unconditional. There are no conditions that need to be fulfilled to be able to retain the gift.

Now it is plain that the greatest gift of all is conditional. The greatest gift of all is to be able to live forever in the presence and company of our Creator. That gift is conditional as you find in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." It looks like "whoever"--anybody who wishes--but it says, "whoever believes in him," so it is conditional upon believing in Jesus.

You can see that emphasized in John 3:36: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him." So the gift of God's own heart, the gift of his friendship, the gift of his life, the gift of his Spirit, and therefore the ability to live with him forever after this world is over, is conditional upon our faith in Jesus. Our participation in Jesus is conditional upon our faith. To come into Jesus you have to have faith. Actually to stay in Jesus you have to continue to exercise faith, which is belief and obedience. John 15:6: "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned."

So there are certain callings and vocations that are the irrevocable, unconditional expressions of God's magnanimous love to us human beings, and then there is the gift of living forever with him that is conditional upon our faith and our readiness to submit to his will. Loved ones, God is so good. He does not force us into his family. He has put us in this garden of the universe and he does everything possible to insure that we will exercise our free wills to choose to live with him or choose to live without him.

It is that attitude of his that causes many of us to question verses in Job and Ecclesiastes. Maybe you would look at Ecclesiastes 7:15, as it concerns this old question of suffering that so many of us see as an obstacle to belief in God, when really it should be the very opposite. It should be an encouragement to see how fair the Father is to all people. "In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing."

Many of us say, "Why is it that good people often suffer, in this world and bad people often prosper?" Because our Father is a fair God. He rains his rain on the good people and on the bad people; he shines his sun on the good people and on the bad people. God has certain gifts that are irrevocable. God has placed us all in this garden of the universe so that we will have a chance to meet him and get to know him. He will not bribe us into his family by giving certain gifts to encourage those who are turning to him and taking away certain gifts from those who are turning away from him. He gives the same gifts to all.

The gifts and the calling of God in that sense are irrevocable. It is true, loved ones, that the promise God made after the rainbow in the covenant with Noah, that as long as the earth remains, seedtime and harvest will not fail, that promise is made to Rubenstein, to Hitler, to Stalin, to every murderer that has ever lived on the earth. It was made to all of us. God has certain gifts that are irrevocable. He does not draw back no matter how we behave.

Of course, that brings us to ourselves, because the garden of this universe is like any created thing--it requires maintenance. There is not one of us that has not come from God's own hand into our mother's womb without a certain calling and certain gifts that are fitted for the maintenance of this universe. There is not one of us here, whether we love God or hate God, whether we believe in him or deny him, that does not come from God's own hand to our mother's womb with a certain vocation connected with the maintenance of this created world and with a certain gift to be able to fulfill that vocation.

All of us are in some way the expression of God's preserving grace; He is committed to preserving the arena of his universe as a place where we can get to know him. In order to preserve it he uses you and me, bad and good, godly and ungodly, satanic and Christ-like people.

So, many of us are here to look after the crops. Some of us are here to control the animals and the birds and the fish. Some of us are here to keep order among the nations and some of us are here to keep order in the explosion of knowledge by computers. Others of us are here to take care of the commerce of the world. Some of us are here to take care of the chaos that would otherwise grow in our society if we were not part of the law enforcement process. Some of us are here to keep rooms clean. Some of us are here to carry away garbage and keep dirt away. But all of us come from God's hand with a calling and a gift that is irrevocable.

Now you may think it is bad or good. I think it is good. It's his own grace that every one of us experiences that. There is nobody here that can say "I do not have a vocation. I have been sent here with no purpose," or "I do not have the gifts that are needed." No! God's Word says plainly that there are calls from God and there are gifts that are irrevocable, whether you turn from God for the rest of your life or not.

That is why a swearing drill press operator can still have great pride in the skill and the dignity of his job. It's not just because he is satanic and proud. God has given him a calling and a vocation that has therefore a dignity about it, not because of the drill press or what he does, but because his Creator has made him and given him gifts to do that job.

And even though he can't sense it and hates God, still he senses, "There is a dignity in my calling. I do have a vocation. I do have gifts that somehow have come to me." He can use them in all kinds of ways, but they have come to him from God. That's why a Churchill occurs at the right time, whether he believes in God or not. God gives to this world whatever men and women are needed to maintain its fabric until his work of redemption is completed. That's why an Einstein is given to the world. You know the contribution that he made to the universe. It is no wonder that he said that all ideas come from God. He sensed that the things that he had had come to him from beyond. God does give ordinary secular vocations to all of us that are connected to the expression of his preserving grace towards the world. That's why all of us have a dignity in our labor, whatever it is.

If you say, "Doesn't it all change when you believe in Jesus?" No. What does change is that you

please God's heart with your love and attitude. The authentic part of being a child of God is not that you give out tracts or become a preacher or that you go to church, The only authentic things, the only "sine qua non" [the only thing without which you cannot do] is that you are pleasing God's heart; but our vocations are something that God has given to all of us, good and bad alike.

Now would you come with me a little further? Because there is even a greater freedom. We tend to say, "Well, that is secular vocation. That is everything to do with the preservation of the fabric of this created universe. What about the whole task of calling people into God's friendship? What about preachers and teachers who are responsible for bringing the news of this friendship with God to others and for leading others into the very heart of God's being? Surely their gifts are revocable." Well, think about it. Countless are the instances where the gift of prophecy has been exercised very efficiently. Prophecy is the sense of speaking forth God's Word, where the gifts of prophecy have been exercised through Balaam's ass, through men whose lives have not always been Christ-like. At first it caused me to wonder, and then I began to see what the Father has done. He has lifted us out of the "fiddler on the roof" kind of shakiness about whether this is the right man to listen to or that is the right man to listen to. God says, "You hear God's Word because of the gift of prophecy I exercise through some man or woman or book, sometimes good and sometimes bad, but it is my gift of prophecy that you hear." Those gifts and that calling are irrevocable. Loved ones, that is true.

I remember being in Mexico maybe twelve years ago. We were putting a roof on a little church way up in the mountains near to Monterrey, and this farmer was feeding us during the week we were there. We went in one night and he had a record on of a crusade. I didn't even recognize the name of the person who held the crusade, but this man was God to this Mexican farmer. Because this preacher had been used to convert all of his family. I thought, "This man must be a great and godly man to have been used by God in this way." We came back after a month in Mexico and the papers were full of this evangelist, who had been a practicing alcoholic for fifteen years. This was the man who had been used by God to convert this family. The fact is, whether we like it or not, that the calling and the gifts of God are irrevocable.

In a way, this is good, because you know the way we Protestants deal with any of God's Word that we don't like too much? We denigrate the character of the preacher. If you can't get rid of the Word, if the idiot won't stop, at least you'll make him invalid by cutting his feet from under him and talking about him.

Do you see, loved ones, God lifts us out of that? God lifts us into a dignified position. He says, "You have not heard a mere man speak this morning. You have not heard a man whose life you are utterly dependent on for your faith. No! You have heard a gift of prophecy that is irrevocable that I give because I've called this man to do this. His own relationship with me is his own affair. You can't decide how good his relationship is by how well he exercises the gift of prophecy. He may exercise it beautifully and his life may be a mess. So do not judge the gift of prophecy by the Christ—like or unchrist—like character of the person. That is up to him and his soul's salvation." The gift of prophecy is God's.

It is in a way a great liberty, and of course it puts our feet on very solid ground. We are not involved here in something a bunch of young people or some young Irish guy has started. We are involved in something God himself is doing among us. I'd repeat Luther's words that it is not some country preacher that you hear or some ordinary pastor, it is the Word of God that speaks to all of us Sunday by Sunday.

Now do you see the great freedom? Your secular vocation is not dependent on your boss or your colleagues. Your secular vocation, your secular calling, is given by God; it is irrevocable. You have certain gifts that God has given you that are irrevocable. What a stability that brings to your life. You have those gifts for life and you have a calling that God is giving you for life. But then your sacred life is not dependent on man either. It isn't dependent on the preachers that you meet or the books that you read, because it itself is dependent on the gift of God's prophecy which is given irrevocably. Do you see what a freedom we have?

Do you see what a dignity you have? What you do Monday through Friday is not your choice. It is a calling from your Maker that he has given to you and it is irrevocable. Whatever you do, whether you do it badly or not, and the gifts that he has given you for that, are real gifts and they too are irrevocable. So good is our God to us and such a firm stability does he give us. Our faith and our relationship and your response to him is not dependent on this preacher or that preacher. It is dependent on the gift of prophecy which he gives without repentance, irrevocably and unconditionally. Though that may have some fearful things for us, yet it has more encouragement than anything else because what you hear Sunday by Sunday is God, usually despite man rather than through man. It is God himself that is speaking to us. Thank God that the call and the gifts of God are irrevocable.