

The Purpose of Existence

Romans 11:32

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

Let's imagine that we are driving a jaunting cart on a winding, hilly, Irish country road. A jaunting cart is a spring cart like an old-fashioned surrey except that it is just two wheels. As we are driving along we see an old, old man carrying a heavy stack of wood on his back. He is bent under the load. As we draw level with him we call to him, "Would you like a ride?" He looks up gratefully and says, "Yes, thank you." He climbs laboriously up on the cart beside us and our old horse strains to get the momentum going as we head for the hill.

Then as it's straining like mad to pull us up the hill, we happen to look around and the old man is sitting there with the stack of wood still on his shoulders and his face red with the strain of balancing this thing on his shoulders. We say, "Listen, why don't you set the wood down beside you on the seat? What's the sense of carrying it on your shoulder?" He says, "Oh, no sir. I'm grateful for you giving me a ride, I wouldn't ask you and the old horse to carry my wood as well." And the old horse would feel like turning around and saying, "If you were between the shafts like I am, you would know who is pulling that wood up this hill!" Because whether it is sitting on his shoulders or not, we are still carrying it for him.

It is interesting, because it is utterly unreal on his part, isn't it? He is not being realistic. He isn't actually carrying the wood. Our old horse and cart are carrying the wood. It is not realistic at all, the way he is looking at things. Because of that lack of realism he is living under a lot more strain than he needs to live under. He could have set that wood beside him and sat back and enjoyed the ride. He certainly is living under a lot of strain that he doesn't need to live under.

Thirdly, he isn't being quite fair to us, is he? He is showing us gratitude for giving him a ride but he is still trying to hold on to some sense of gratification. "Well, they may be giving me a ride, but at least I'm carrying my own burden." He still has the feeling, "Well, actually I'm doing this myself, though they happen to have given my body a ride."

That's exactly the same as the situation between you and your Creator. He is carrying and has carried you every second of your life. You couldn't turn your head at this moment if he didn't continue to hold together the molecules that constitute your vertebrae and your neck. You couldn't even think through the end of this sentence I've just spoken if he weren't holding together the elements of logic and enabling your mind to understand those elements of logic.

Yet, you know our relationship with him is shot through with the same unreality as that old man's relationship to us. Our relationship is shot through with the whole feeling of independence that we have. We are carrying some of it by our own independent strength. Yet it isn't true at all. You think that you are sitting still at this moment; you think you are sitting in one place. You're not. You're moving at hundreds of miles an hour at this moment. Since I started this sentence, you've already travelled thousands of miles through space in a very complex orbit due to the turning of the earth on its own axis and its passage around the sun.

Yet you and I will get up at the end of this service and walk out the door and we will be utterly convinced that we have done it by our own strength, without anyone's help. We are so delighted when

we do it fast, never realizing that this dear God has already propelled us through thousands of miles of space without any effort on our part at all.

Loved ones, that attitude of ours is so deeply ingrained in us. It's the attitude that says, "Oh, yes, but I can still do these things myself. I am doing them myself. My life is dependent on my own efforts and on nobody else's." That attitude is so deeply ingrained in us, that, of course, we end up in hideous positions of strain and tension. We are bound to end up in those ways.

You have only to think of one poor guy standing upside down in Australia. The only reason it is possible is if some other being is holding the laws of gravity in position. Otherwise that little guy is going to fall off Australia. Underneath our life there are all kinds of situations like that that are only possible if there is some power or force that is holding this thing together.

It breaks upon us at times with cancer, doesn't it? I think many of us are getting over the idea that cancer is in itself as threatening as often the emotional name "cancer" is. Nevertheless, it does bewilder us, this multiplication of cells, doesn't it? We are all aware however successful our professional lives are, however healthy we are keeping ourselves, we still can point to some guy or girl who did exactly what we did, had just as happy and successful a life, and yet in a flash some cell began to over-multiply and no doctor could keep it back, however much he cut out of their body.

Isn't it true, that whether it's the Dow Jones going through the roof and then coming back down again, or whether it's the interest rates going sky high, or whether it is some fellow in Iran doing something ridiculous, all of us know fine well that there are a thousand different factors that affect our lives that we cannot control? That's what causes us incredible tension and strain, isn't it? We like to try to think that we can control it all. We are like the old man; the attitude is so ingrained in us that we can't stop it even when we come against problems such as the ones we listed.

Even when we see there are obvious examples of factors and forces that we cannot control, yet we still hold on to this idea that somehow we are controlling it. It's up to us to control it by our own strength and effort. Yet deep, deep down we know that here we are on this piece of earth, and the shots of Saturn and other planets serve to impress on us that this earth is miniature; it's like a little tiny marble in the mass of space, and it's going through the air thousands of miles an hour. How do we know; why should we believe, that we will stay on it? How do we know it won't crash, it won't collide? Loved ones, despite that, we still keep up the age-old deception and strain that that old man had, as he sat on the cart carrying his burden. We still keep trying to persuade ourselves that we are actually self-existent beings; the weight of our lives is on ourselves. There really isn't any being who is looking after every little event.

Now, loved ones, it is our dear Father's task to convince each one of us in the seventy-or-so years that we have on earth that he is carrying our stack of wood as well as carrying us. That's what our dear Father is intent on doing and for the same reasons that we would want to convince the old man of that fact. The result is that we will begin to live realistically and in real dependence and trust in him as our Father, on whom all things depend. That's our Father's task.

I'll tell you how he does it. He constantly gives us commands that we know deep down are right, but we can only obey them if we trust him. Here's one, loved ones, if you will look at it. They are verses that I don't think you have often looked at. Yet they are relevant to our twentieth century

rushing kind of life. I think we will all see ourselves in these verses without any trouble. James 4:13-16: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain'; whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."

Yet you know what we say. We say, "Listen, you have to set goals for your life. Now isn't that true? That's self-evident; everybody knows that. You have to set goals for your life." You know as I say that, loved ones, all our minds agree and we say, "Yes, obviously that is a self-evident truth that was given right to Adam in the Garden of Eden." Of course, it wasn't at all, but we are utterly convinced that setting goals for your life is right. We are convinced it is a godly and right thing to do. So we set our goals and feel justified in setting them. We set goals for our professional lives, our family lives, our marital lives, our financial lives, our entertainment lives, our retirement lives.

Then do you know what we do? We worry, worry, worry, worry about how far we are from those goals, how near we are to those goals, or whether we are on the way to fulfilling those goals. We make up little laws with which we beat ourselves over the head for the rest of our lives. All of us little beetles and insects and flies are flying around the earth with our own little goals trying to wear ourselves out getting to our little goals. Instead our Father wanted us to live each day fully knowing he had tomorrow taken care of.

We all say, "Well, it is just irresponsible to live a day at a time and do what lies to your hand with all your heart. That's irresponsible!" Of course, that's what God wants us to do. He wants us to do what lies to our hand with all our hearts, enjoying today and letting tomorrow take care of itself, but you can't do that unless you can really trust that there is some great computer-mind up there that is taking all the events and circumstances, all the achievements and failures and all the things you do and don't do, and is weaving them into the pattern that he has in mind for your life.

Unless you believe that, unless you trust him to do that, you have real trouble with the command "Do not be anxious about tomorrow". Do you see that? The very reason he gives us that command is to let us see that you are not obeying it. That's not just so that we will be discontented with ourselves, but so that we will see that the reason we are not obeying it is because there is some huge area of our lives connected with our futures or our present that we are not leaning on God for. There is some stack of wood that we are trying to carry ourselves.

Now, loved ones, that's the purpose of God's commands. We often think the purpose of God's commands is so that we will obey them, but the purpose of God's commands is to drive us to see that if we trust him and lean on him, his commands will not any longer be commands but descriptions of our lives. So, in a sense, God expects us not to be able to obey the commands unless we are actually trusting him, living in trust and faith in him.

Now that's what this verse that we are studying today says, loved ones. It would just summarize the truth that we have been discussing. Romans 11:32; "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all." That's it! He has consigned us all to disobedience, he has given us commands that we can't do anything else but disobey so that we will come and lean on him and find out that his horse and cart is actually carrying us as well as the stack of wood that we are carrying. That's his purpose; that's why God gives us these commands.

One of the most obvious commands is the one about choosing a life partner. It's in I Thessalonians 4:4: "That each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God." So each of us who are not married, that's what we want to do. We say to ourselves, "I don't want to choose somebody just because I want to jump into bed with them. I don't want to choose somebody because I am overcome with my own desire for satisfaction. I want to choose a wife or husband in holiness and honor. I want to have God first."

So we try to do that and three or four days later we have the old binoculars out again searching, because we think we should help God a little. We do it because deep down we don't trust him. That's it! We don't trust him for that. That's why we have trouble with the lusting. It's stupid. We think we have trouble with lusting because there is something wrong with our emotional life. No! We have trouble with the lusting, we have trouble with the going out searching, we have trouble with the looking all the time, the watching, trying to make good impressions -- we have trouble with that strain because we don't trust him.

We have this stack of wood that is called marriage and we are carrying it on our back. We will not lay it on the cart and say, "Father, will you carry this? Whatever you want to do with it, you are the boss. You know my nature, you made me, and you know me better than I know myself. You know if I'll be happy married; you know if I'll be happy not married. You know who I'll be happy married to. Lord, there it is; it's in your hands. I'm going to do what you told me to do--enjoy my life and live fully--and I'll leave that in your hands." Suddenly the lusting becomes no problem because we are happy, we are fulfilled, we are satisfied deep down with our lives.

Now, I'd say to you, "Do you have any disobedience in your life? Do you have any command of God that you are finding difficulty obeying?" Well, now will you stop for a minute trying to obey and will you begin to ask your dear Father, "Lord, I can't breathe if you didn't give me the power. I would burst apart at his moment if you didn't exercise control over the parts of my body. Lord, everything I know is dependent on you. Father, will you show me if there is some area of my life which I have not put into your hands and I'm trying to laboriously carry on my own shoulders?"

Loved ones, it will take some time and some real desire on your part to find that out. It will, because here is the strange thing. We are so contorted, we human beings. If we said to the old man, "Look, why don't you put your wood down on the seat? Why bother trying to hold it on your shoulders when the horse is pulling both it and you?" The old man would probably smile rather sheepishly and say, "Well, I suppose you are right. I could sit back and relax and kind of pretend that I'm carrying it. Okay." God gives us a command: "Why don't you leave your burden down and let me carry it and sit back and enjoy the ride?" Do you know what we say? We lie back, balancing the burden on one hand and we say, "Is this the way I would be relaxing if you were carrying the wood which I know you are really carrying?" That's what we say. We are dumb.

We say, "Well, I don't want to trust you with my marriage, but I won't lust. I won't lust." Or "I won't worry about tomorrow, I won't, I'm going to set my goals, but I won't worry about tomorrow." We are mad. We determine to obey God's commands, which can only be obeyed if we are trusting him, we determine to obey them without trusting him. We are so stupid!

Loved ones, that's why God gives us such a hard time. That's why so many of us have trouble with obedience. The problem is not the obedience, the problem is us contorting our sin or compounding our sin a second time by trying to look as if we are obeying without obeying.

The real problem is we need to ask God to show us what is wrong in our trust of him in that area of our lives that makes us disobey him so continually. We are not meant to be walking with bent shoulders. We are not! We are meant to be walking tall and glad and joyful because we have a dear Father who has done everything for us. We all know that if he were to move one finger, the air in this room would be unbreathable; we would die immediately, so dependent are we on his goodness and kindness. Has he failed? Has the sun failed to rise? Have the days failed to follow one another? Have the seasons failed? No! How often we have found that he has continued to be faithful when we had long ago forgotten him.

Loved ones, our dear Father has everything in our lives organized and he, believe it or not, can carry and is carrying the wood whether you acknowledge it or not. He will carry it on through this life. You have the choice of realizing that and sitting back and enjoying the ride and trusting him. Or, you can continue to try to pretend that you are doing something on your own.