

## What Does God Owe Us?

Romans 11:35

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

You remember me mentioning Lorraine Peterson's book for high schoolers entitled, *If God Loves Me Why Can't I Get My Locker Open?* That's the problem of evil. It is what theologians categorize under the heading of "theodicy". Theodicy is the vindication of God's providence in the view of the existence of evil. That's the kind of thing we deal with when we ask, "How can you believe in a good God in the light of the existence of wars?" Or, "If God is good, why is there suffering and sickness?" Or, "If the Jews are the people especially chosen by God for him to reveal his Fatherhood to the world, how come they are the very people that have rejected his Son?" That's a problem of theodicy.

How can you believe that God's will will triumph in view of the actions of man's free will? How do the two work together? Paul demonstrates to us how to answer that kind of question in Romans 9, 10 and 11. First of all he shows that we should try to explain it by reason. He says, "You say, 'Why have God's own people apparently rejected God's son?' Because they have the free will, first of all, to reject God's will if they want to.

Secondly, God is using their rejection of his Son Jesus to give us gentiles the opportunity to receive Jesus. Moreover, God is using the rejection of Jesus by the Jews to indicate to all of us the plight of those who reject the place that God has given them in his Son. Lastly, "he said, "the Jews who do believe in Jesus when he comes again to earth in bodily form will in fact be received into heaven by him."

Paul points out to us the way to deal with the questions of theodicy is first to do everything you can to explain by reason why God does a certain thing. That's what John Milton, the English poet, said was "justifying the ways of God to man". That's our first responsibility. But after all, that's no great problem to our generation, is it? Our generation specializes in calling authority figures like God to justify their actions. Isn't that true?

Our specialty as a society is calling those in authority to explain and give us reasons why they are commanding us to do certain things. We say, "Don't just tell us not to fornicate, tell us why we shouldn't fornicate. Don't just tell us not to steal. We've had enough of that. Tell us why we shouldn't steal." Our generation is pretty good at that first step that is necessary in explaining problems of theodicy.

We are the generation that invented the evaluation of teachers by students. It used to be--you may not remember it--but it used to be that the efficiency of teachers was proven and tested by examining how much the students had learned from the teacher. We are the generation that didn't want to burden the poor little minds with memorizing a lot of useless knowledge that they would have to produce again in examinations, so we took a shortcut. Instead, we give forms out to the students and ask them to evaluate how well the teachers are teaching them.

We are the experts at saying to figures of authority, "Don't just tell us to do things. We want you to explain why we are doing it." It is interesting, isn't it, that even those of us here who remember the frustration of some of the categorical prohibitions that either parents or grandparents leveled at us are a little uneasy, aren't we? In spite of all this new approach to authority, our

society is falling apart for the want of authority. So even those of us who were against Victorian categorical prohibitions and commands and directives, we ourselves are quaking a little inside because we don't feel we have the authority business quite right even yet.

The truth is there are two steps necessary in dealing with this business of what an authority figure directs us to do. One step is the one we talked about, the one Paul demonstrated. First of all, explain as fully as you can why a certain authority figure has done a certain thing. The second step is equally necessary--see -that he has the right to do it whether you understand it or not.

Loved ones, that second truth is more of a blessing to our dear lives than we realize at this moment. Now you might turn to Romans 11:35: "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" You are asking God to explain the plight of the Jews. Or, to explain why cancer exists in a world that he has made. Or, explain why war exists if he is a good God, or explain why your life has gone in a certain way. Paul says, "God owes you nothing, not even an explanation if he cares not to give it." That's what that verse says: "Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"

Put it another way: What does God owe you? Or to put it in political terms: Did you give him your vote? Did you elect him? Now I know this is not normal thinking for our generation but it is in this dear Word to point out to us that there is some truth here we missed. You see, God owes none of us anything. We didn't elect him; we didn't make him. Who of us here have given him anything that he should repay us? None of us have given him anything.

I know our kind of impudent pride tends to stand up on its high horse and say, "You are just trying to get out of explaining. That's no answer." But wait a minute, we aren't playing a game here. We are not talking about some teacher or professor whose tenure is dependent on our approval. We aren't talking about some president or congressman who is looking for the next election. Loved ones, God is God whether you and I agree with it or not. He is God! He doesn't owe his position to any of us here.

Therefore, actually, he doesn't owe us a thing. Not even an explanation if he doesn't want to give it. Milton's sonnet goes like this:

"That murmur, soon replies 'God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best  
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state  
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
They also serve who only stand and wait."

It is a sentiment that so rarely we share. I know it seems a little offensive to you at the beginning, but the truth--that God is God and that we have no right to question, and in fact, cannot question him---that-truth, like all other truths, sets us free. It does. At first you may think it doesn't, but it does. This truth sets us free from all kinds of worries and anxieties that are caused because we feel we have the right to call to account for his actions, not only the President of the United States, not only congressmen, not only teachers, not only our parents, not only those who are bosses over us Monday through Friday; we feel we have also the right to call to account for his actions, God the Maker of the whole universe. Loved ones, that brings in its train a Pandora's box of evil worries and anxieties that you have no idea of. Thousands of us end up in psych wards today because we do not really believe that there is a final moral arbiter and authority in the universe. Thousands of us end up confused people who are dominated by our own self-will, because we

will not believe that there is a final moral arbiter in the universe.

Do you realize that the only essential factor for delivering a man or woman from their own self-will, is the moral imperative that is involved in the categorical commands of a Supreme Being? That's right. When you steel that from men and women you throw them into the chaotic arms of their own self-will. You know those loved ones who complain about false condemnation. "Well, I'm always under false condemnation." You know the loved ones who say, "I am so preoccupied with these commands that God has given me." Tell me this: Are their lives incredibly full of order and discipline? You would think that if they were scrupulous about obedience to God's commands, if they are preoccupied with God's commands, if they are preoccupied with avoiding any condemnation, that their lives would be filled with order and discipline. It's interesting that they aren't; they are the most chaotic lives.

The truth is we cast ourselves into that chaos because we refuse to believe that there is anyone in this universe who has the right to say, "Do that. I'm not explaining why you should do it, just do it." I'd ask you to look back at your school days. Which were the best classes? Were the best classes the ones where the teacher couldn't keep discipline and we all could do exactly what we wanted? You know they weren't. The classes we remember and the classes that went the fastest were the classes where the teacher had sometimes iron discipline, but certainly a good discipline. At times we even feared the teacher a little.

What about your own life? When was it the most efficient and most fulfilling? Was it when you had no job and could do just what you wanted from the moment you got up in the morning and you had no authority over you at all? Was that when you achieved most and were happiest and when time went fastest? You know it wasn't. The best times for most of us have been when we have been in a tight schedule, under a firm authority, with hardly time to breathe, and yet we felt more fulfilled and more satisfied than we have ever felt in our lives.

Do you see that our salvation, our very sanity in life, the very order of our lives, depends on our recognizing that there is an authority in this universe that has the right to tell us what to do or what not to do, whether we understand why or not? That very belief in that kind of God in our lives will deliver hundreds of us from all kinds of confusion and chaos. Do you see that it is belief in that kind of God? It is not belief in a kind of democratically-elected idol or philosophically-inferred idol that we create in our own minds and call God. It is belief in God as he is outlined here in this dear Book. God is self-existent, unquestioned, invincible, and unbehoven to any of us. It's the God to whom none of us have given anything and, therefore, who owes none of us anything. It is that God. Thank God that is reality. Reality isn't the other kind of god, that's an idol. That's why so many of us end up in confusion and condemnation and guilt, because we have fashioned an idol that cannot tell us anything unless we agree with him.

Do you realize how many of us are like C.S. Lewis' dog? I understand it so well, because we have one just the same. C.S. Lewis said they had a family dog who never actually obeyed you, he just sometimes agreed with you. I say it with love to you. There are dear hearts here this morning whose lives are in chaos because they won't do anything unless they agree. What they call obedience is just agreement. They know nothing about obedience and, therefore, they know nothing about joy and peace and happiness.

Here's reality. What were you before you were born? Were you a twinkle in your father's eye? Except that even your dad knows that he didn't make you. Even your mom, who saw you come out of her body,

even she was as amazed at your little fingers when you were born. What were you before you became a seed in your mother's womb? You were nothing! You were nothing before you were born. You were empty space. What was God before most of us in this room were born? He had already created the brains of Einstein and Darwin. He had already created the skill of Beethoven and Picasso and Handel and Chopin. He had already seen European empires fail and rise and fail again.

Two thousand years before that he had watched Persian and Greek civilizations pass away. Even before that, when there was no earth here, even then in the beginning was the Word, Jesus, and the Word Jesus was with God and he was God. Jesus himself prayed to God and said, "Restore to me the joy and the glory that I had with you before the creation of the world." Job talks about those days when the morning stars sang together and the sons of God exulted for joy.

Loved ones, God had a whole organization going even before the earth was created. Nietzsche said God was dead; now Nietzsche is dead and God still lives. All the faculties that you have now, in fifty years or seventy years at the most, they will be gone. God's faculties will still be here. You and I were nothing before God made us. We owe everything to him. Before God in his love made you, you had no hands for touching, you had no hair for combing, you had no heart for loving, and you couldn't smell roses or a wood fire burning. You had no legs for walking, you had no lips to smile, you had no mouth to laugh, you had nothing. God gave you all that. Not because he had to, not because he owed you anything, but because he loved you so much that he wanted you to enjoy those things. God owes us nothing. We are utterly dependent on him; he is in no way dependent on us.

That's why Paul puts it in such a categorical way. It's in Romans 9:20, "But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me thus? Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?'" Of course, he has. Our God by definition can do whatever he wants. If I could help you to see that there is an incredible peace comes when a man or woman accepts that -- that there is a God who existed before you came into being and he has made you. Accept that you are the creature and he is the Creator and he does all things well. It is up to you to try to understand him where you can but where you can't you are obligated to obey him still. Why? Because he is God. He is the one greater than whom we do not know.

Loved ones, we talk about Carter and the dearth of leadership. We say we have no great leaders like Churchill or Lincoln and our world is going to bits because of the lack of leadership. We say also that our society is ridden with guilt. It's interesting; we complain that there is no leadership, there is no authority, and at the same time thousands of us are in mental and emotional trouble because of guilt. Do you not see that these days were foretold in Scripture? Paul in writing to Timothy said the days will come when men will not put up with sound teaching, but they will gather to themselves teachers who have itching ears, itching to hear what the audience wants them to say. God said that the days would come when we as a people would not put up with sound teaching but we would want teachers who taught us what we wanted to hear.

Do you see? The problem isn't the leaders; the problem isn't in leadership. The problem is in follower-ship. The problem isn't that we have no leaders; the problem is that nobody will follow. The problem is not that there is no God, but that nobody is prepared to be a creature and treat him as God. Everybody wants to be God themselves and to do what is right in their own eyes. Loved ones, our lives would simplify and our society would last longer if each one of us would bow down to God and say, "God, you are God. I am your creature. What do you want me to do?" That's it. That's just logical. It's philosophically valid. It's just good sense. Who of us have given anything to God that

he should repay us? Not one of us.

Let us pray.

Dear God, so many of us have wondered why things are so bad. So many of us have wondered why the streets of New York City are so unsafe. So many of us have wondered why many of our friends have emotional troubles of all kinds. So many of us have wondered why we are confused rather than being happy, peaceful and simple people that our forefathers seemed to have been.

Lord, thank you for showing us this morning the answer. It is because we are refusing the fact that you are God and we cannot continue to treat you as a fringe benefit whom we call to account for how you have made us. But you are God and you have the right to do what you will. It is our responsibility and good sense to try to understand what you are saying and obey you. Because you will have the final word.

O Lord, we want to do this most because you are God. It is truth and you are so good to us. When we turn the question around, "What have you given us that we should repay you?" We would not have enough years in our lives to list the things you have given us that we should repay you for. The only thing we can give you is our obedience and our friendship. Thank you, Lord.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us throughout this week.