

## Pleasing God Wholeheartedly

Romans 12:2

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

It is obvious to everybody here that if there is a God who is in control of the whole universe, and if he has power over what things happen after we leave this world, then it is very important to know what he had in mind for us when he made us. I think all of us see that. No other will for our lives is as important as the Creator's, who made us, because any other will is second best, and any other will, even if we invent it ourselves, is going to be unsuited to our personalities if God made us, having in mind what he wanted us to do. That is why many of us are concerned with what God's will is for our life.

I would like to point out again what his general will is, and to make a point very clear to each of us that what we ought to do is set out to fulfill his general will. Only if we are doing that, will he then explain his particular will to us. I think a lot of us, especially those of us who are starting out in life, spend an awful lot of time fretting, worrying and anxious--"What should I do with my life?" Instead of all that silly fretting, we should be intent on fulfilling what God obviously wants for all humanity. In fulfilling his general will in our lives, he will make his particular will clear.

I think a lot of us get into mystery and real uncertainty about our own lives because God has told us some definite things he wants all men and women to do, and we are not doing those. We are saying, "I know all that, but I want to know, what are you going to do with my life?" And God is saying, "Commit yourself to my general will that I have made plain in Scripture. If you will do that, then don't worry; I will, in the course of your doing that, explain my particular will to you." The interesting thing is, as you go on through the years you begin to find that it is not such a big deal whether you are a welder, whether you are a waiter, whether you are an electrician, whether you are a psychologist, whether you are a pastor or whether you are a nurse. That isn't really the big issue. You begin to find that those things are relatively unimportant. So, loved ones, the first thing to do in finding God's particular will for your life is to get out after his general will for men and women with all your heart.

That is stated plainly in what grammarians would call an appositional clause in Romans 12:2 (A clause in apposition is one that explains what has been said in the previous clause. "Reagan, the President of the United States" is a phrase in apposition that explains who Reagan is.) The first part runs, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God." Then this is the clause in apposition: "what is good and acceptable and perfect." It explains what the will of God is--"that you may prove what is good."

Most of us come to that realization when our lives begin to fray at the edges. We zoom along pretty happily until life begins to come apart, either through some self-indulgence of our own or through some action of someone else. Some habit begins to disrupt our lives--drugs, promiscuity, driving ambition--and we begin to find life falling apart. It is usually at that point that we turn in desperation to God and begin to get the message that God's first will is that we do good. Usually we get that message, because it is only then that we are open to hearing something from somebody else. We begin to get the message that God wants us to do good or to live good lives.

At that same time we begin to realize that living good lives or doing good is not what society thinks. That is, doing good is not doing the things that society thinks are good, moral things to do. It is not being a good boy or girl; it is not doing the things that all good people should do. Suddenly we begin to realize, as God gets through to us, that what he means by good is what is his will for our personal lives. God is saying something slightly different to you to what he is saying to the person next to you. You could take twelve people who are living in promiscuity, and God could be saying something different to each one of them.

Many of us realized this when we came to this crisis in our lives--God wanted us to be good, but "good" didn't mean feed the hungry, try to save the widowed and help everybody. God doesn't mean that. Good is God--it is what God's personal will is for you. So at that time we began to look at the commandments of God in that light.

Maybe you would look at them in Exodus 20:7: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." Verse 14: "You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house." Suddenly the law of God ceases to be a group of general precepts and advice for society and it becomes God himself speaking to us. It becomes God saying to you, "Here is the thing I have against you. You are not necessarily committing adultery, but in your heart you are. You are not necessarily stealing things, but you are stealing people's reputations by your criticism and gossip. You are coveting. That is what I have against you." God begins to zero in on specific sins in our lives. That happens to many of us who first look to God. Suddenly his laws cease to be just general precepts and become God personally confronting us and saying, "Look, just you and me, face to face. Forget all the rest of the people. I have this controversy with you. You're doing this thing and the only way I can get rid of it is to destroy you completely." That is when many of us have entered into the dark night of conviction of sin. We begin to realize that there is no way out for us. We do have adultery in our lives or we do steal or we are dishonest or we gossip or we do yearn after things that other people have. Then we realize that our God is personally telling us, "I have to destroy you to get rid of this in my universe. I have to destroy you, the source of this action." We begin to realize that we are condemned to death for what we are doing. It is then that our relationship with God ceases to be just general and takes on a very personal feeling of conflict between us and our Maker.

Now, loved ones, it is usually out of that dark night of conviction and out of that frustration of our will before God and our realization that unless we submit to him we are finished, that we begin to see that--miracle of miracles--this Jesus who died on Calvary actually bore that destruction for us. It is usually out of deep conviction and concern and desperation that we are going to be destroyed eternally that we begin to see Jesus appearing before us in a personal way saying, "Father, forgive him, forgive her, for they know not what they do." It is then that even though we can't fill in all the details, we begin to sense that Jesus has borne these things in himself and allowed them to be destroyed so that we could live.

Of course there comes out from us a great sense of gratitude and a great desire to please him and be what he wants us to be. Then we find a miracle occurs inside us. A different spirit seems to have come into us. Instead of being afraid of God, instead of living in dread of him, instead of living in dread of not doing the right things, we sense a spirit inside us that looks upon him as our dear Father and our dear Friend, and that wants to be like him and please him. That is what we call the new birth. At that point this spirit seems to take over our lives and we leave far behind all the bad things we did, and we are intent on living a good life and doing good. We want to read the

Bible, to pray; we want to tell others about how great God is, and that is what fills our hearts.

Now if you haven't experienced that, I would encourage you to deal with God today. I would encourage you to come into the new birth, because it is a real and mighty change that takes place inside you. Some of us have done it, and we say like the song says, "I remember it well." Yes, I remember it well. I remember when I was filled with gratitude to Jesus. I remember when my whole life was laid out to please him. I remember when I looked forward to Bible study. I remember when I enjoyed the praying. I remember when I couldn't wait to get to the office to tell others about him. I remember that.

Many of us find ourselves described in a verse in Jeremiah, and you should look at it and trust God to speak to us through it. Jeremiah 8:5: "Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding?" We don't like the sound of that word. We like to pretend that we are not backsliders. Yet a kind of oldness and staleness has come into our whole relationship to God. We have begun to do the things that we are supposed to do because we are his children, but we don't find ourselves doing anything extra. Indeed, those things themselves we are beginning to have trouble with. Really, if the truth were told, we are backsliders. We try to rationalize it by saying, "Everything in life is like that. You get a motorbike and are filled with enthusiasm for it and then it settles down into the norm. You get a new house and everything is enthusiastic about it, and then it settles down into the norm. That is the way life is. You can't be at a perpetual state of excitement and enthusiasm all the time." Yet we know in our hearts that somehow or other those dear guys in the Bible were like that. Moreover, we can see other people who have been on this road for years, and they seem to be more enthusiastic for Jesus than they were when they started out. Often the word "backslider" is a word we don't use because it cuts just a little too close to the quick of where we live.

Loved ones, if you are in that situation at all, the first thing to do is to get back into the grace that you had with God. Stop moping around, stop trying to justify your position, stop trying to pretend you are good, stop trying to pretend that you are where you should be. Get back into the grace that you had with God when you first met him. That is what Jesus' parents did. When they got on their journey from Jerusalem and discovered that Jesus was no longer with them, they went back to where they had lost him, and that is where they found him. It is the same with us. For many of you who have backslidden, get up on your feet and get back to where you lost Jesus. Get back to where you missed or began to miss the enthusiasm you had when you were first born of God.

There are two steps in that--one negative and the other positive. The first, the negative one, is in Luke 8:14: "And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life." Identify in your life the cares and riches and pleasures of life that choked the free spirit of Jesus to death inside you. It is very practical. You know what they are. If you will go back along the way, you will find where you lost Jesus. You will find where the money-grubbing became too important. Or you will find the thing that God gave you that you started to covet, instead of leaving it in his control to take away if he wanted to or give it to you. You will find the thing that you began to guard because you thought the Lord has given it to you, and then that became more important to you than him. Or you will find the care that has overwhelmed your preoccupation with Jesus -- some care that came upon you through a death or a change in your financial situation or a change in your job situation or domestic situation. You will find some care that you have become obsessed with. The heart of the problem is that instead of leaving it with God and trusting him with it, you cease to have faith for it, and that is how you lost Jesus. You ceased to exercise faith for this thing, thinking either in a deceptive way or a knowing way that you ought to take care of it yourself. Identify the care that

has begun to take over your whole life.

Identify the pleasure. The pleasure usually sneaks in on you. It isn't something that you see, "It is either God or it is this pleasure;" it is usually something that you wheedle your way into, you slip into gradually. There is nothing wrong with water skiing or golf or other sports or other pleasures, if they are just sidelines and details and under God's direction. But if a pleasure becomes a thing you live for, if it becomes TGIF, if your life is built on the next little thrill that comes along--thank goodness it is Easter, we will get a break; or thank goodness it is Friday, we will get a break. Maybe even thank goodness it is my birthday, we will get a break; or thank goodness it is anything, just so we will get a break. When you begin to live for that that is the pleasure thing. Identify the cares or the riches or the pleasure that have begun to take over the place that Jesus once had in your life. Then just stop it. If it is golf every day, your heart attitude to golf is the real problem, but at least stop the golfing; that will allow the heart to catch up. Cut it down from five to two days a week. If you find yourself hooked on nicotine, back off, deciding that you are determined to complete this until you get absolute victory over it. Whatever the thing is, back off from it, stop it. That is the negative side.

The positive side is in Revelation 2:4-5: "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." Then the direction: "Remember then from what you have fallen, repent"--that is the first part, turn from those things--and then "do the works you did at first." Do the works you did at first. Start praying, start reading the Bible, start talking to others about God. Don't expect a great sense of reassurance through the joy of your salvation returning. God may well ask you to go cold turkey back to him. Do it without feelings, without expecting anything from him. He has already done plenty for you. It is not too much to ask you to simply do the works that you did at first.

Loved ones, that is it. Don't look into your miserable old mind and try to juggle all kinds of feelings and attitudes, trying to reassure yourself, "I do love God a little. I am a little obedient." Forget that stuff. Don't look in, do the works you did at first; do the things that you used to do when you first met the Lord. Those are the two steps to get back into grace with God: Identify the cares or the riches or the pleasures that have choked the spirit of Jesus to death inside you and stop those, and then do the works that you did at first. Do the things that you used to do when Jesus' Spirit was alive and enthusiastic in you.

Now if that is all you do, in three weeks time you will be back in the same mess. That is where we go astray. We get back to where we were and we think we can hold that position. Let me point you back to Romans 12:2, the last clause of the verse, "...that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Those are three stages of what God's will is for us. You have hit the first one--what is good.

The second is "euarestos" in Greek and it means "what is pleasing to God." It is not long after you are born of God you begin to sense Jesus' Spirit wanting to please God, that is, wanting God to be able to look into your heart and be pleased with what he sees there. In other words, it is not long before Jesus' Spirit expresses the spirit of any child to his father, "I want to be like my father. I want to be like him. I want to be clear and transparent; I want to be pure and honest. I want to be loving the whole way through. Lord, I want you to look at me and be pleased that you see a reflection of yourself in my heart." The tragedy is that, especially in these days, many people say, "That is impossible! You can't have a heart that wants and pleases God every day and every night. You can't!" Yet, there is no question about it in this dear Book. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure

in heart, for they shall see God." [Matthew 5:8] The Psalmist said, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." [Psalm 51:10] God said in the Old Testament that what he cares most for is a humble and contrite heart.

Loved ones, we are getting so coarse in our society that we think it is just wonderful to do the outside good things that God wants us to do, but we will never get to the level of being inside what he wants us to be. It is essential that we do! Jesus points out why, if you look at what he said about the heart in Mark 7:20: "And he said, 'What comes out of a man is what defiles a man.'" They were discussing drinking and eating certain foods and he said, "Forget that. It isn't what comes into you that makes you dirty, it is what comes out of a man that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, comes evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness."

Loved ones, the truth is, if you leave your heart untouched, all that mess and garbage will keep spewing up into your outward life until you lose any semblance of obedience to God that you possess. You know how often, outwardly, you are expressing love and affection and concern to somebody, and inside, in your heart, there is almost a total indifference to how their lives go. You prove it when you are away from them, because you criticize them. You have expressed all kinds of love to them and have given them the impression they could trust you; you get their back turned and you are talking to somebody else, and you end up criticizing them. That contradiction in our lives is what shows us that it is not enough to come to the place where you have your sins forgiven and do outwardly what is good or what God wants you to do. Unless you deal somehow with this mess inside, you will never be what the Father wants.

It is the same when you exhort somebody in that very mature, wise way about their own sexual life and encourage them to live a pure life, and when you are away from them your own heart is filled with thoughts that are unclean. Or you express great indignation about some sin that somebody else has committed, and when you finish what that you know the same things is in your own heart. Most of us, after we are born of God, realize that God wants us to be clean the whole way through. Do you know, in a way, I don't blame you if you don't, because we are such a self-excusing society, that the Father does not gossip about you to other people? He does not point the finger at you and say, "Do you see what they are doing?" He doesn't. The Father doesn't resent even if you are choking his Son's Spirit to death; our Father never resents. He doesn't have a root of bitterness against people because they have rejected him. Our Father's heart is pure, and it is possible for you to have a pure heart. This is a lie that you can't get along in life unless you manage to hold down all the garbage that is coming out of your heart. No! You can come to a place where the garbage isn't in your heart. Indeed, it is God's will for you. Do you know what Jesus said about where the kingdom is? "Enguus" is the Greek preposition. The kingdom of God is within you; the domain of the king is inside you. What is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter what kind of an outward life you are living if your heart is not clean and at peace and filled with the joy of being able to look the Father straight in the face; your life is not experiencing the kingdom of God as God intended it.

Actually, God has more for you. What he did on Calvary in Jesus was to take that old heart of yours and destroy it in his Son and replace it with the heart of Jesus himself. He wants to give you that heart, and that is what we call the fullness of the Spirit. The apostle described it in this way in Acts 15:9: "Do you see that the Holy Spirit was given to them as he was to us, and cleansed their hearts by faith." It is possible for the Holy Spirit of Jesus to come in and fill you with himself and cleanse out all the dirt that is in your heart. It is possible to express your love and

affection to someone and to turn around from them and still have only that in your heart. It is possible for your wife or your roommate to do something that offends or inconveniences you and instead of finding irritability and criticism coming out to them; it is possible to find love coming out to them. It is possible to have pure water flowing from inside your heart.

Actually, any of us that live together know that that is what we need. Whether we are roommates or husbands and wives, we know what bothers us. It is not what the other person says, because they can often say the right thing and they can often do the right thing. But we know what is in their heart, and that is what kills us; that is what makes hell out of any home. It is not so much the outward actions, it is what you know is coming from a person's heart. Loved ones, it is God's will that we should not only do good, but that we should be pleasing to him, that he can look at our hearts and see they are pleasing all the way through.

Now how does God bring that about? In Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock loaned the merchant of Venice a large sum of money and he then said to him, "If your ships don't come back and you are not able to pay this loan, I only require one penalty." The merchant of Venice asked, "What is that?" and Shylock said, "A pound of flesh." You remember Antonio's ships didn't come back. So the court gathered for the trial, and eventually after all the judgments were done, Shylock stepped forward with his knife and they asked him, thinking that at least Antonio's life could be spared, "Where do you want to take the pound of flesh from on his body? His arm or his leg or maybe his shoulder?" And Shylock said, "I want the pound of flesh around his heart." At once Antonio knew that there was no way in which he was going to be able to give a pound of flesh around his heart unless he himself died.

When God talks about circumcizing our hearts -- cutting around our hearts--there is only one way to do it. There is only one way to get rid of your heart and replace it with Jesus' heart. It is to get rid of you and replace you with Jesus. That is the second stage that God has for us. The new birth is like Jesus bringing a candle into a dark room, and only then do you begin to see the real darkness in the corners of the room. Jesus' will is that the room of your heart would be filled with light. It is possible. Jesus is able to fill you with his Spirit if you will not brook that heart of uncleanness any longer. I'll tell you this, if you try as I tried to live with it in some kind of outward victory, you will lose everything. It is like cancer. You try to live a healthy, whole life while retaining the cancer inside you and it is a one-way battle. It is the same with a clean heart. God's will is for us to be pleasing to him, and the only way to be pleasing is to have nothing in that heart that is contrary to his love and his purity. I pray for each one of you that you will set out on that quest to be clean the whole way through. Of course, what you do find is that it is a lot easier life. It is a lot easier to be clean the whole way through and be what you are than to be trying to keep up a pretence. Jesus can do it for you. He can fill you with his Spirit if you are willing to make the agreement that Antonio had to make with Shylock. "You can take even the pound of flesh from around my heart, even if it means taking me myself."

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for dying for us and for bearing our sins to Calvary. Lord, we have seen the reality of backsliding and of losing that first love. Lord, we see it has something to do with our trying to live a double life -- trying to maintain our right to our anger, the right to our pride, the right to our jealousy and envy. All this while we kept up a facade of being your follower. Lord we see that it is a stench that lifts to high heaven. We see, Lord, that it crucifies you afresh.

O Savior, we do want a clean heart and if that means we take ourselves to Calvary, then we would rather have that than we crucify you and lose everything you have given us. So, Lord Jesus, you bought us with a price and we see that you are due to receive what you bought and you ought to receive it. It means not only our lives but our wills and our hearts. Lord, we would ask you to begin to work with us through your Holy Spirit and convict us of this inward sin that we feel. Bring us to the place where we are willing to face anything to be cleansed and to be filled inside with your love and your Spirit.

Lord, we thank you for doing such a thorough work in us and we want that thorough work made real in us this day.

Lord, I pray that each one of us here will not rest until they come through to peace and joy in the Holy Spirit with hearts that please you.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us.