

Serving the Lord

Romans 12:11d

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

As the years pass in your life you probably found the same thing as I have that if your attitude each day depends on the things that happen to you, you're up and down and up and down. Most of us feel that we should have some attitude to life that is steady and stable and consistent and yet I think many of us wonder what that should be; what attitude should we have as a basic attitude to our lives, whatever happens to us?

That's what we have been studying these past few weeks because our Creator, in the verse that we've been looking at, does indicate what that attitude should be. He says, "Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord." (Romans 12:11) Probably most of us hear that and feel kind of tired because it seems like one of those pep talks before the game, like a commercial.

It seems like one of those "get out there and be a man", "stand up", "go-go-go", "blast off", "be aglow with the Spirit, never flag in zeal, serve the Lord." And there you are blasting away like mad and you kind of feel, "Okay, okay, let's get to it", and it's interesting that kind of interpretation that we put on that verse is typical of the great error that we have towards life and towards God himself because our great error is sin; self-initiated, self-directed action independent of God.

When we hear that verse, we feel that, don't we? We feel here's God standing up and saying, "Be aglow with the Spirit, never flag in zeal, serve the Lord", and we feel we have to get in there and do it. That's the error we found we had in interpreting that phrase "never flag in zeal", because we interpret zeal as the kind of bright eyed enthusiasm that we see in the eyes of the car salesman as he moves on unerringly towards his victim -- or that dear soul that comes to the door and knocks and then begins to tell you a lot of information about their church that we don't want to know and we feel, "Yeah, that's zeal and I'm never to flag in that kind of zeal." Yet we feel in our own hearts, "Boy that zeal is kind of fanatical. It's the kind of zeal that a person exhibits who is preoccupied with what they're trying to sell me rather than preoccupied with any love they have for me." Yet loved ones, isn't it true that most of us when we hear "never flag and zeal", we think of that kind of zeal?

You remember we said a couple of weeks ago that that's not what the verse is saying at all; that the zeal that the verse talks about is the kind of haste, the freedom from delay that the astronauts show when ground control in Houston says, "Fire the retro-rocket."

They don't sit back and say, "Which retro-rocket and when would you like us to fire -- this afternoon sometime?" And ground control says, "You do that buddy and we'll never see you again. Fire it now!" We said that that's what the word "spoude" means in Greek. It means the haste, the instant obedience with which you do what ground control is telling you to do.

We said that Christ is at the right hand of God and he can see every object that is moving into the path of the orbit of your life years before you have seen it and he can tell you at exactly the right instance when to do what. And at that moment, it's vital that you pull that switch, fire that retro-rocket, strike that rock, walk around those walls of Jericho, speak to that person about that

thing or do that something at that moment because faith is action. It's instant obedient action. So the verse means that; "Never flag in zeal", that is -- don't hesitate.

God doesn't tell you a moment ahead of when he wants you to act because he doesn't bother you with a backlog of old commands or he doesn't bother you with the responsibility of deciding when to obey; he just tells you at the moment what to do, just as ground control tells the astronauts what to do, when it's to be done.

We saw the same thing about the next part of the verse, "Never flag in zeal", and then, "Be aglow with the Spirit." We often make the same mistake there. "Be aglow with the Spirit, oh that's those wild frenetic, fanatic types that are aglow with some kind of spirit but it looks like a wild, mad, crazy spirit. It looks the kind of spirit that sends you out round the world bent on only one thing and that alone and it's not like the kind of spirit that an ordinary person has at all."

Of course, what we found was even Jesus condemned that kind of spirit. Do you remember when he saw it in the Pharisees? He said, "You travel over land and sea to make one convert but you don't really love people", and being aglow with the Spirit is not that kind of frenetic, fanatic, religious zeal.

The Spirit is the person that God has sent to the earth that tells the swallows when to fly south, that motivates all those mysterious events in nature that we cannot explain; the leaping of the salmon upstream over incredible distances at a certain time of the year, the myriad other events besides the moving of the planets and the stars. The Spirit of God is the one who guides all that, who gives everything in the earth its place and guides it how to fulfill its function and you remember we said that Spirit is in you.

That dear Holy Spirit is in each one of us and that Spirit is able to tell you what you're here to do in life and to guide you to do it. Now the interesting thing is, loved ones, that if we in fact adopt those attitudes in our own life, then we will automatically end up doing what the last clause in this verse says we should do. In fact if we do what the last clause in this verse says we should do, we will be what those two previous clauses describe.

Now let's look at it and keep a matchstick in your intellectual eyelids before you go to sleep so that you give me a chance to speak because it is one of those clauses!

Romans 12:11c, "Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit", and then here is the clause: "Serve the Lord." Now, the Father is speaking and he says, "John's in the navy and Mary is a secretary and Dan is serving the Lord in the mission field." I bet that's what my mom said; "I have two sons, the youngest one is in the police force in Ireland and the eldest one is serving the Lord in the Methodist ministry." But if only the full time ministers and missionaries and church-workers are serving the Lord, what are the rest of us doing? Who are we serving?

Well, actually most of us will probably say, "Well, ourselves" and to expiate the guilt that we feel in pursuing that with such unrestrained zeal, we give as much time and money to the church as we can. But isn't it true, loved ones that we often identify serving the Lord with this kind of full time missionary or full time church-worker, and really it's a heresy. It's a heresy that has created a tragic situation in most of our present day churches because I think you'll agree, most of our present day churches are filled with people like ourselves, who spend most of our week serving ourselves or the customers or our families or our loved ones and for a few hours on Sunday we kind

of serve the Lord. And because we don't have time to serve him all through the week, we're so busy doing the things that we have to do to earn our money, we pay other ministers and church-workers and church-secretaries to do the witnessing and the evangelizing that so often we haven't time to do or aren't trained to do.

You may say, "I don't feel like that, that's why I come to this church." But loved ones, you must admit that's the way the great majority of us feel or if we don't feel that way, that's the way we act. That's the way it works out. You may say, "Oh well, that's not the way I feel." But that's the way it works out, isn't it?

Most of us spend Monday through Friday, 8:00 to 5:00 anyway, occupied in earning our money. Then in the evening, here in the summer time, we do our lawns and do our yard work and watch TV and we go out to eat an odd time. But that is the week. Then Saturday comes and we go out shopping and buying things in for the next week and we maybe have a little fun on Saturday afternoon and then Sunday, we give a couple of hours to God.

In actual fact, most of us deep down in our hearts have the feeling, "Well you couldn't really say that we're serving the Lord. Sure Pastor must be serving the Lord and those people in London, they must be serving the Lord but we, well, we're kind of second class citizens in the kingdom of heaven I suppose and we're doing what we can you know but you can't do everything." And we all end up with that unsatisfied feeling and loved ones, that's heresy, that's absolute heresy. That is not the teaching of scripture at all.

My dad was an electrician in the shipyard and I remember him leading many-many laymen's conferences in Ireland where there was eternal discussion about how to be a Christian electrician or how to be a Christian joiner or carpenter or how to be a Christian lawyer or how to be a Christian teacher and the emphasis, I was at some of those meetings myself, and the emphasis was always on the fact that you were serving the Lord only when you somehow verbally witness to him. So those who verbally witness to the Lord most, like a minister who goes in and out of people's houses and speaks on Sunday and other people who preach and teach, they are serving the Lord most and anybody who doesn't verbally witness to him, well they're not serving the Lord at all. Loved ones, it's heresy -- that isn't the truth at all.

Now let's look at the verse and I'll try to share with you what this dear part of God's word says. Do you see the word "serve" there in that clause, "Serve the Lord"? Now, "serve" is a mild translation loved ones. It's a mild translation of a Greek verb that probably is very offensive to many of us and it's found in its noun form if you'd like to look at Romans 1:1, "Paul a servant of Jesus Christ", and then do you see the footnote says, "servant or slave" and actually the noun is "doulos" and going back to Romans 12:11, the verb is "dooloo".

In other words, it means slaving. It doesn't mean serving the Lord, it means slaving. In fact you probably don't realize it but all the nouns in that verse are in the dative and it's translated really as regards zeal, never flag, as regards the Spirit, aglow, as regards the Lord, slaving, that's what it means.

It means as regards to the Lord, slaving. Now I don't know how many of you had mothers or grandmothers from the old country, but Irish mothers had many phrases that are welded into their sons minds and one of them, in order to inspire a son to study harder, was "Here am I slaving away in the kitchen all day so that you can go to college", and I think most of us have that idea in our

minds when we hear the word “slaving”.

Slaving means working your fingers to the bone in a kind of sweat shop operation and in the English language, slaving does mean working exceedingly hard. Then here in the States of course, because of the whole racial issue, slaving has a connotation also of prejudice and inferiority and unfairness and inequality.

So slaving is not a pleasant word to us, but the Greeks didn't have that connotation of the word slavery at all. To them, a slave was one who worked under the direction of his master's will and that was the great mark of a slave: one who worked under the direction of his master's will. So when Paul uses the word “slaving”, he isn't thinking of all those unpleasant sides of it that you and I think of, he isn't thinking of that working exceedingly hard side or working your fingers to the bone or being looked down upon or being despised; he is thinking of all the good sides of a slave's life and so he is saying, "As far as the Lord, work as a slave."

Now what is it like to work as a slave? Because that's what God is saying is the way you should live your life. You should live it as his slave. Well, the first thing about a slave is, he is very like a little kid of 6 or 7; he never has to worry where his next meal is coming from because he doesn't get paid, he gets food direct from his master. His master gives him what he needs.

It may be somebody else delivers it to him but he is in no doubt that it comes from his master and he is in no doubt that it comes from his master however hard he works. He never has the idea that he is earning his food. The best relationships of slaves to masters in the Greek and Roman times were that of a real father-son relationship, part of the family. I know we smile at this because we've learned how to be sophisticated and cynical about slavery here in the States but actually in classical times, it was truly that.

The slave didn't have to worry where his food was coming from and he had no notion in his mind that he was earning it or he was justified in getting it. He was, at the end of the day, an unprofitable servant. He simply did what his master gave him to do and his master, out of his love and care, gave him his food. That's what God says should be your attitude.

Boy, that takes a lot of strain out of your life, you know. It means that you don't have to worry where your next meal is coming from. It's very hard if you're in private enterprise and not a slave because you have the whole burden of earning your own money and getting your own food. But what God is saying is, "Look, I have quite an operation here. It's very big, very complex and I have a lot of things to be done. I'll supply every need of yours from my riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). Sometimes you'll appear to get it in the pay-packet, sometimes you'll appear to get it in the salary check, sometimes you'll get it some other way; but you belong to me, you're mine, and I will take good care of you. So don't worry where the next money is coming from, just attend to what I have given you to do." That's one of the advantages of a slave and God says, "You are my slaves. You are to work as my slaves, with all the relaxation and the rest and all the security it gives, because I am a good, kind and loving master who knows you and wants you to be happy more than anything else in the whole world."

Second thing is loved ones; the master determines what the slave is best fitted to do and makes sure that he is given that to do. So if you're a secretary, you are bringing into order some of the mass of information that is day-by-day in danger of swamping this poor civilization and every time you type something, you are bringing order and clarity to some of that information. It is unimportant

how vital that information is. It is unimportant what somebody is doing with that. The fact is, God knows you best and he knows that at this time in your life that is the best way you can bring order into the universe that he has created.

It's the same if you bring order out of steel. If you take a piece of steel or metal and you make it into something useful and functional, you are bringing order into the crude matter of which God has made this world. You are doing what he has fitted you to do and that's all you are to be concerned with and to that extent, you are serving the Lord. To the extent that you're bringing order into that piece of metal or wood, to the extent that you're bringing order into a home, or you bring order into systems, or you bring order into the financial system of the world, or you bring order into the business world. To the extent that you subdue the world and take something that is chaotic and disorganized and ugly and you make it into something with more order in it, to that extent loved ones, that you pick up a piece of paper off the ground and enable that piece of ground to minister peace and order to someone's eyes and therefore to their brain and therefore to their heart and their emotions, to that extent, you are working as a slave to the Lord, you are serving the Lord.

Loved ones, your job is what your dear master has determined is the best thing for you to do at this time and that's one of the beautiful things about a slave. A slave doesn't go out looking for a better job or a job that will pay him more or a job that will give him more comfort or give him more pleasure or give him more satisfaction. He looks to his master and says, "Lord, thank you for this. I do this as unto you. And whenever you want to move me, I'll reckon that that's time for me to move." But loved ones, a slave's position, if he has as loving a master as the Father of Jesus Christ, is a relaxing and a peaceful spot to be in.

If you ever say, "You'll go passive" you can't go passive if you remember that your Father is watching you and knows what is best for you and he wants you to develop fully. He'll bring you to the next challenge exactly at the right moment when you're ready for it and yet it will stretch you a little beyond yourself into his arms. So no, you won't go passive.

Beautiful thing about a slave is, in a way, he is only to be concerned with the rights of his master. He has no rights of his own to defend or to stand up for. They're just his master's rights and he is utterly identified with his master and of course that delivers him out of himself and raises him and elevates him to the place of his master and allows him to enjoy the capacious and magnanimous view of his master and loved ones, that's us.

You're not just here to poke away at a little bench in some workshop to try to squeeze out enough dollars to bring up the kids. You're not. You're not just here to try to hold on to the job as long as you can to try to make it through to retirement, that's not it. You have a dear position in this world doing something for your master that he wants done and that he has fitted you to do. And to the extent that you're doing that with all your heart, you're serving the Lord just as much as Billy Graham or as much as Pope John Paul or as much as anybody else that we think of as religious people.

I would ask you, are you a slave or are you in business for yourself?

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, sometimes we think we are in business for ourselves. We see ourselves worrying and anxious, fretting about where the next dollar is coming from, or how we're going to get a job. Lord, sometimes we think we're not only in business for ourselves, we feel at times we are running

our whole lives looking this way and that to get a job that suits us better. Lord sometimes we feel the lost-ness of it because despite what all the tests tell us, we hardly know what our special abilities are and once we set out on that track, there seems no ending, Father.

We try this job and we try that. We use this ability we have and we use that aptitude. Lord we see that there is no end to it once we not only go into business for ourselves but once we start running our own lives and Father we see that we know nothing. There are so many things to be done in this world that only you can see which one we're fitted to do.

So Father, we certainly can see that you have bought us with a price and that if anybody has the right to own us, you have. We are not our own but we have been bought with the price of Jesus' blood and Father we see the beauty of slaving for you. So Father we would thank you for our present jobs, thank you for our present occupations.

Even if we have no occupation, we would thank you for that at this moment because you are an all wise master and it's not the economy and it's not the employer because the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. But Lord it's you that has brought us into this present situation and we want to thank you for it and we want to do it with all our hearts.

Father, we see that we are serving the Lord by doing this because we are bringing order into this dear world of yours and we're helping to do what you told us to do at the beginning: to subdue the world. So Father we thank you for it and we apologize for any pride in us or any independence or any trying to go into business on our own in this corner of your vineyard.

Father we are content to work as you have told us to work and to do what you give us to do and to trust you to provide for us out of the riches of your glory in Christ Jesus. We commit ourselves to you for this purpose in his name. Amen.