

Mental Assent Or Weak Faith?

Romans 14:01d

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Many of us today in our society don't know why Christianity doesn't work for us. We just don't know. We don't see why Christianity doesn't work for us, we think it should. But we don't know why it won't work for us. We've believed all the things we are supposed to believe, we have done all the things we are supposed to do, but somehow Christianity still doesn't seem real to us, and we don't really understand why.

We are really a bit like John Wesley you remember that we talked about last Sunday, the founder of the Methodist Church. After 34 years of life, he was still trying to believe the right things, and do the right things but somehow still the Christian faith was not real for him. And many of us are like him. We believe all the beliefs about Jesus and about God and about the Bible, and we do all the things that Christians are supposed to do -- we go to church and we read the Bible and we pray and we try to give money to the right people and the right causes -- and yet still our Christian faith doesn't seem real to us.

And the whole reason for it or the whole heart of it is exposed by two separate questions. The first question, do you know Jesus? And many of us would answer, "Oh I mean the same way as do you know Reagan, yeah I know Reagan, sure." Do you know Jesus? "Yeah, yeah I know Jesus, I know Jesus." And many of us would be in that position. We'd say, "Yeah, yeah of course I know Jesus, and I believe he is the son of God, and I believe he is the Savior of the world, and in some way he saved me too; yes I know Jesus."

But the second question we'd have a little more trouble with. Do you know that Jesus knows you? In other words, you can ask a person, do you know Reagan, and they say, "Sure I know Reagan. That is, I know who he is, I know about him, I know what he looks like, I have seen him often on television." But do you know that Reagan knows you? "No, I have no question -- he doesn't know me. He doesn't know me from Adam, he never met me." And when we would be asked that question about Jesus, do you know that Jesus knows you? We'd feel uncomfortable with the question, many of us. We might say, "Well, he knows everybody, so he must know me, but no I don't have a particular consciousness in myself that he actually knows me. I am not conscious that we have a relationship with each other."

In other words, there are many of us here this morning who believe and regard ourselves, and are regarded as, part of the company of the friends of Jesus -- but we are more conscious of the friends of Jesus than we are of Jesus. That is, the company of the friends of Jesus -- the others in the church or the others in the body -- are real and living to us, whereas Jesus is still a little bit of an historical figure, still rather a far off ideal that we are aiming at, still a kind of example to us. A bundle of principles that we regard as Christian, but he himself is not very real to us.

Now many of us would say, "Well the reason for that is my faith is just a bit weak, if my faith were stronger the reality of Jesus would be stronger to me." But actually the reason is not that our faith is weak; the reason is that isn't faith at all. That many of us have a purely mental assent to the beliefs of Christianity and together with that we have a strong willpower by which we follow what is called the ethical behavior that Christianity demands. And so, we feel we have the two parts that make up faith: belief and action. Except that it's not real belief, it's mental assent. And the

action is just a set of standards that we keep trying to live up to. And in actual fact we have no personal sense of Jesus in our own lives and the reason is that we have not personally appropriated what Jesus has done for us on Calvary.

We haven't entered into a personal trust with him. We simply have an acceptance of him in our minds and we try to follow him in our lives and we try to keep company with the people who respect him but we ourselves have not personally appropriated him by personal faith into our own lives and hearts. And therefore we have not actually received anything from God. We haven't. We haven't actually received anything from God, we haven't actually been regenerated, we haven't received the New Birth in the spirit that God alone can do, we haven't actually received through the working of the Holy Spirit that life changing, and heart warming experience that is called the New Birth.

Now, we say we are born again, but we say we are born again in the same sense that many intellectuals will say they are born again. They are born again because they see things completely differently, they understand things better than they ever understood them before, and they will often say "Oh, it was like a new birth I entered into." Now, many of us talk about the New Birth in those terms. We say, "Look, I see things differently, I really see what you Christians are saying, I see what the church is saying, I see what the Bible is saying, I see what God is after, I see how Jesus is the Savior of the world, I see how he has borne our sins, I see how God has forgiven us our sins, I see all that, and so it's a new birth, I see things completely differently." Except that it is primarily a mental change for us, it's primarily a cerebral change but there has not been done a work in our hearts that has given us a new motivation, a new love of God, a new love of others, and the new love of Jesus, a loyalty to Jesus -- a personal loyalty to Jesus, and a love of his word, and a love of prayer day by day.

And so we say to ourselves, well yes I am a Christian I am not a Christian the way some people are, some people -- boy, they seem to have a very personal sense of Jesus in their lives. They seem to have a very personal loyalty to him. Me, when I want to know what to do I kind of listen to everybody else, what the Christians say we should do, and I think the thing through and then I decide. But I really don't have that kind of personal, kind of mystical -- (we love to call it mystical because it kind of gets us off the hook)-- I don't have that personal mystical awareness of Jesus that others seem to have. But then I'm not built that way, or my faith is maybe a little weak.

But many of us I think are in that spot, where we say, "Yeah I am a Christian but I don't have a personal loyalty to Jesus the way some people seem to have and I don't have a great love of his word, for instance. Well, I sometimes read the Bible, I sometimes don't read the Bible. When I am in trouble I read the Bible, I sometimes pick up the Gideon Bible and look up the places where you need help in sickness, or help in financial trouble, I read it like that -- but I don't have a personal love of God's word -- and I pray at times but I don't pray every day."

Loved ones, that is mental assent. I don't blame you for saying to me, but don't many people regard this as Christianity? Yes they do, sure they do. Sure we are in the same situation as many loved ones in India who say, "I am Christian." They mean they are not Hindu; they are Christian. They were brought up inside the Christian ideology. So many people today talk about mental assent plus aligning their lives with the Christian ethical ideals as Christianity. Except that they don't have any personal loyalty to Jesus. They don't have any personal love of God's word and they don't miss it particularly if they don't pray each day. And that's because a work has not been done in their hearts. When a work of regeneration is done in your spirit you love the Father, the Spirit cries

“Abba Father,” and you want to talk to him, and you want to read his word, and you can’t do without reading his word every day, you want to be there and you enjoy it. It’s something that comes from a work that is done within.

Now why are some of us caught in this mental assent kind of Christianity? Why is it not even as this verse that we are studying? It’s the verse in Romans 14 and it says “Those who are weak in faith, welcome them, but don’t welcome them to dispute about opinions.” And what we are doing is just preparing to study that verse in these introductory sermons, but why can we not even be called people who have weak faith? Why are we people who have just mental assent, why do we end up caught in that position?

For one great reason, there is one great reason that looms above all other reasons and explains why some of us are cerebral Christians -- not really Christians at all. Some of us are mental believers. We are not really born of God. Some of us are just kind of camp followers we have not experienced the work of regeneration in our hearts and our spirits. One great reason looms above all others, has loomed above all others throughout the centuries and looms further above all others in this society of ours today, and the reason is you don’t take sin seriously. That’s it. We don’t take sin seriously, and so we don’t really see the need of a Savior that we receive by personal appropriation. We don’t take sin seriously, we don’t.

And I am talking about sin. Not just crime, we all are worried about that. Not just vice, because we are concerned about that when it affects our neighbourhood. But we don’t take sin seriously. As a generation we don’t take sin seriously, as a people we don’t take sin seriously -- and worst of all, those of us who sit under this Christian word, we don’t take sin seriously. Sometimes I have thought the poor old soul that drinks himself to death and doesn’t come near church sometimes he is more afraid of God than all of us, who have kind of comforted ourselves with a false Gospel. And sometimes the dear old sinner out there is nearer a real fear of God than those of us inside the churches who are comforting ourselves with a light healing. The reason so many of us are caught in mental assent rather than in a real New Birth is, we don’t take sin seriously. Now, what is sin? And how serious does God regard it?

Well I’d ask you not even to go back to the New Testament. I would ask you to go back with me not a thousand years ago, not two thousand; let’s go back three and a half thousand years ago to the time which we regard as mankind’s childhood. We regard this time as the primitive primeval times of the Old Testament when things were crude and cruel and human flesh was cheap and we feel, boy they were hardly even regarded as pagans. They were almost savage animals in those days. Let’s go back to those days and see what God calls sin and how seriously he regarded it.

Loved ones, you find it way-way back in Exodus. And it’s Exodus 21:17, "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death." Because cursing your father or your mother is sin. And Romans 6:23, four thousand years later says, "The wages of sin is death," "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death."

In other words, if you wish your father or mother were out of the way, so that they wouldn’t bother you, whether you’re young or whether you are old, that’s what cursing is. Wishing they were out of the way, damn them. I wish they were damned. I wish they were out of my way. It’s wanting ill for your father and mother, it’s desiring ill for them. It’s failing to love them. Whoever curses his father or his mother should be put to death. Why? Because in God’s eyes it’s as bad as hitting them. That’s in verse 15, "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death." So, hitting

your father or mother is a sin so heinous that the only thing to be done with you is to kill you and destroy you, at that very moment. Why? Because you hit your father or mother, or you curse them because you think that they are going to spoil your life in some way. And you think that because you don't trust that God is able to modify anything that they do to you, so that his will will be done anyway.

So the real sin is not simply hitting them or cursing them, it is your lack of trust in God, your independence of him. You are feeling that "Yeah, he can't do anything about it anyway. If I can't stop my mother or father doing this they'll spoil my life." So it's a lack of trust in God's ability to overrule their actions, that's the sin. And that's why you must die. The wages of sin is death. And so, hitting your father or mother, or cursing them or wishing they were out of the way -- in the primeval savage pagan days, those days which were crude and cruel, when human flesh was cheap, those days that knew nothing of our sophistication, or the evolution that we have entered into in society -- in those days, if you hit your father or mother or you cursed them or wanted them out of the way, you died. That's how serious the sin of distrust in God is regarded in his eyes.

Now loved ones, why is that? Well, I'll explain it to you through another verse in the Old Testament. This is, the reason that a person who hits their father and mother or curses them has to die. Isaiah 11:9, "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." That describes the way life will be after this world is ended. But you see that's the way it is now in God. God is like that today. No one hurts or destroys in his presence. And to preserve that he has, as it were, heat seeking missiles, or sin seeking missiles that are launched immediately at any human being that hits or strikes, or sins, or distrusts him. He has sin seeking missiles that go out and destroy them and ends the stream of uncreative life that flows from him to them and they are left with the empty shells of their physical mental lives. And that happens all the time, you see that happens now. We are the dummies, we think it doesn't happen and we wonder why we have the sense of emptiness and the sense of condemnation and sense of guilt at times. Why? It's because that has happened, that has happened. Sin has wages that are death whether you know it or not.

And the marks of death are the sense of guilt for one thing but also the sense of emptiness, the sense of pointlessness. Naturally, you feel empty and pointless if already the eternal life that was flowing into you has been taken away from you. Sure the whole personality reacts and responds in a suddenly conscious, "I am going to die at 70, that's going to be it, utter darkness after that." Certainly there is a great pointlessness and emptiness that comes into your life at that moment. And so, that's working anyway whether you know it or not, whether you believe it or not. Whenever you sin, this power from God from his holy mountain comes out and cuts you off from the flow of uncreated life that comes from him and you say, "Well I am still alive." Yes, sure you are left with the physical shell that you have here, the mental shell that has been given life unconditionally for 70 years or so. But after that goes, that's it.

The tragedy is we don't believe that. You listen to me at this moment but you psyche yourself into not believing that. Here is the way we do it. We say, "Well now wait a minute, things are different now, aren't they? I mean you couldn't hit your mom or dad then or you couldn't curse them without dying. But since Jesus came and since he died we can hit our mom or dad, we can curse them and we'll be forgiven." That's the tragedy we've got ourselves into. We believe that. We believe that. "See that's the old covenant, that's the Old Testament. Somehow God had higher ideals back then. But after two thousand years with this crowd he kind of has lowered his sights."

It just doesn't make sense, does it? Because even a liberal theologian or a liberal philosopher will say "Oh, we've evolved today, we've evolved. If that was the standard of ethical behavior back in those days we've evolved into something higher and finer than that. We surely must live at least as high as they did back then." But what's more important is, does God change, does God change? Does God say back then, if you hit your father or mom, or you curse them you have to die -- but now you don't have to? It's not so. You remember Jesus; if anything he emphasized that sin was even more inward than that. He said "Look, you've heard how it was said of old, you shall not kill and if you kill you are guilty of the judgment. I say unto you, if you are angry with your brother you are guilty of the judgment."

And in actual fact, loved ones, God has already exercised that death penalty on every one of us. He has actually taken us and put us into his son Jesus and destroyed us utterly there, and absolutely. And that has already been done. And the Holy Spirit is constantly trying to actualize that in our lives today. God is all the time trying to bring home to us the destruction that took place in Jesus' death on Calvary. And meanwhile we keep on playing a silly game. We look at Jesus death, not as C.S Lewis did or as the man, George McDonald did who had such an influence on C.S Lewis, not as the method by which God destroyed the sin and the sinner. But we keep looking at that as a cheap admission ticket into heaven. And we keep taking the attitude, "Yeah, well I hit my father and my mother and I strike them or I curse them or sometimes I don't want them, or sometimes I get angry with my brother, sometimes I criticize, sometimes I gossip, sometimes I steal, sometimes I worry -- but the Gospel surely is that despite all those things somehow because of Jesus' death -- I don't know what it has to do with it -- but somehow because of Jesus' death, I am going to get in on the lower level than the rest of the people."

Well then are you going to turn heaven into hell? Are you going to get in as a gossiper and a worrier and an angry person and a striker of parents and a curser? And you're somehow going to live with the other people who allowed Jesus' death to operate upon them? And loved ones that's it, only when you and I see sin inside us, as a blinding, deep rooted, hopelessly overpowering force within us that makes us distrust God and trust only ourselves, that makes us independent of God and depend only on ourselves and the world. Only when we see sin that way, will we see that it is an integral part of us and that there is only one way to be freed from it and that is to be destroyed with Jesus and be remade completely new and be born again.

And while you and I keep seeing sins as inexpedient little human traits, that we ought to try to get rid of to make our entry into heaven more appropriate, while we keep taking that attitude to sin, we will never grasp Jesus with all our hearts in desperation. And loved ones the fact is that, Jesus bore for you the pain of utter destruction and utter death to your sinful self. And only he can manifest that in your life and that's what you need. You are so bad and I am so bad, that our Father knows the only thing is to wipe us out and start over again.

Now, only when you come to Jesus with that kind of attitude can the Holy Spirit do anything for you. But you see that's where we make the mistake. See, we have been kind of taught to come; "Oh come and receive Jesus, receive Jesus." Well you know it's true, you have to receive Jesus -- but what you have to do about everything else, is grasp the dear Man's arms and legs and say, "Lord Jesus, I would never have seen light of day if the wrath of God had to burn out my sin the way it burned it out in you. Savior, Savior I have no life outside you, I am dead, I am a condemned man to death. All the signs that I have of guilt, of worry, of anxiety -- they are like the marks of cancer in me. Sin is within me and right through me and out the other side; I am a dead man apart from you. Lord Jesus, I have life in you and you alone. Savior, I pull you to myself and I hold you and I praise

you night and day, morning by morning, moment by moment."

That's living personal appropriation of Jesus. But you don't do that, unless you see the trouble you are in, loved ones. And what we need to see is what sin is. And we need to stop this game we are playing with the Old Testament and this game we are playing with the New Testament. And we need to stop listening to the false prophets. You remember the Old Testament prophesied that there would be false prophets who would say, "Peace, peace when there is no peace." And "Who would heal my people, my people lightly?" That is, people who would smooth it over and say, "Just believe in Jesus and you can do what you like, just believe in Jesus and you will get into heaven." Loved ones, believing in Jesus means grasping Jesus with every ounce of your strength. It means embracing him with your heart and your will and your whole being. It means a desperate grabbing for the Savior and a hugging him to yourself and saying, "Lord, Lord I was with you on Calvary when you died. Savior, what in me did you destroy that I am not free from? Show me, show me Lord Jesus, personally show me."

And the Lord Jesus is able through the power of the Holy Spirit to speak out of eternity into you here in time and tell you. And so he will say to you, "My pain was partly caused by your desire to be well thought of and the tendency you have to boast. That caused me more pain than you can think. That part made me cry out, 'My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?' And I have destroyed that now, it's destroyed, it no longer exists. What you are expressing there is the fantasy of it, or the shadow of it, or the memory of it, or the lie of it, that Satan is trying to persuade you is still there." And then you have to say, "Lord, you have done it, that's enough for me."

See the truth is, loved ones, God has worked a mighty miracle that is very hard for us to understand. The closest we can come to it, is the thirty second delay that you get in T.V. shows where there is audience participation. With our crude technology, that's as close as we can come to it. You know the way they actually record the program and then they telecast it maybe 30 seconds later. So, it's telecast almost immediately but there is that 30 second delay so that a very alert or well-trained monitor can erase anything that the network regards as legally or morally objectionable.

Now, if we can do that with our pretty crude mechanical machinery, you can see that God from his position in eternity where he can see past and present and future all at once, he is able to see the life that you already chose to live and he is able to see that, that life has led you to hell and has already condemned you to outer darkness, and he moment by moment has taken that life as it is manifested here in time because actually he can see it in eternity all as one great thing. But it's manifested in time moment by moment and as it were in each moment but actually before each moment occurs. He put it into Christ. He destroyed it and renewed it so that you have the freedom and the opportunity to see the life as you chose to live it, to reject it and to live the life that Christ has for you. And that's what is going on moment by moment by moment by moment.

So it is like an eternal miracle that is continually appropriated at moment by moment by moment. And as you do that you are delivered from sin and your life lived that renewed born again life in Jesus. And so of course God graciously looks at you and he can tell how radically you are ready to commit yourself to that. How radically you are ready to commit yourself to that and he understands you're real and in the light of that he gives you utter and absolute peace in your conscience, do you see that? So, you say to me, "Oh, well then God can only accept me when it is all through?" No, God can read you. God can read you like a book. He knows how radically committed you are to total repentance -- and total repentance is not repentance for this sin and that sin, it is a total turning away from yourself, a total rejection from the evil within you and a total acceptance of Jesus.

And in the light of that God's Holy Spirit knows how real you are and in the light of that he manifest to you peace in your conscience and that's how you know you are forgiven. And that's why a person can never know true forgiveness over unconfessed sin or over a partially committed life. They can't. You can never know true forgiveness and the true peace of God's acceptance of you in your conscience unless you have actually repented completely and turned against yourself and turned utterly towards the Savior.

Now, you can see, that's a pretty radical thing. That's a real appreciation of sin and that's radical repentance. And if you do that, you have a devotion to Jesus that will out distance your devotion to your mum or dad, or your husband or your wife; or your mother, your father, or your son or your daughter. You'll have a personal devotion to Jesus that will live through thick and thin. Loved ones, that is what salvation is. The Savior has borne you in himself in a way that he did not bare me. He bore me in some terrible ways but he bore you in some drastic ways. You cut his heart open, you caused him pain that cannot be described, you caused him agonies of forsakenness in his Father's relationship, that nobody can explain through a few words like, "My God, my God why hast thou of all people forsaken me?" You caused him pain that none of the rest of us did.

You have a personal repentance and a personal receiving of him to do that none of us can do for you. When you do that, at last peace is manifested in your conscience and you at last sense you're at peace with the world because you are at peace with the Creator of the world. And there is nothing like that peace. And that's clear, loved ones. I would suggest that you do make that peace, if you haven't done it. If you have lived with a mental assent then I would suggest to you that you make that peace this morning, and that you do it definitely and deliberately.

I would think that you are better to put your all on the altar, you are better to come up here, you are better to kneel down and you are better to say, "Lord Jesus" and confess to him your sins and repent of them. And explain to him that you didn't know that at all. And if you want him in your heart and you want him to live in you from this day forward and that you will devote yourself first and foremost to him because you owe him everything, then just get up and go back to your seat. But I think really, if you've lived in that unreality for years, I think you should make a definite commitment and turn your life over to him in a definite way. So that other people can see, so that above all you know on such and such a Sunday I did that. I made my commitment to you, Lord Jesus, and I will stand by that until I see you face to face.