

Tree of Life or Tree of Knowledge?

Romans 14:01f

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Will you take a Bible please and turn to Romans 14:1 "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions." Many of us like that verse because we think that it describes us – we're weak in faith. So we like any directive that encourages other people to be kind to us like this, so we kind of like the verse. And yet we need to be concerned that so many of us who have had almost a lifetime exposure to Christianity, still think of ourselves as weak in faith. We need to wonder about that. And then we probably need to be absolutely clear about what God means when he calls people weak in faith.

That's the kind of thing we've been talking about over these past weeks -- what does it mean to be weak in faith? It's obvious that it means that you do have faith. You can't be weak in faith if you don't have it -- so it does mean you have faith -- but you are weak in it. You are just a beginner and you need to be strengthened in it. And then we have said that it's not just general faith that is being talked about here, but a saving faith. And we talked about what saving faith is. It doesn't just believe all the Christian concepts about God being our creator and our Father, and about Jesus dying to enable his Father to forgive us. It isn't just the Christian concepts about the day of judgment, about the second coming of Christ. It isn't just that kind of mental belief -- that is just believism -- it's having in your head a set of ideas. Saving faith is not simply mental belief, or mental assent to the truths of the Gospel.

Then we said too, that saving faith is not believing all those things and then deciding "Oh wait a minute, if these things are true, I better clean up my life. I better make my life act in accordance with what I believe. I better start going to Church, I better start attending Bible studies, I better start giving money to certain ministries, I better start praying, I better start reading my Bible." That isn't saving faith. Many good Muslims and good Buddhist do just that. In other words, there are many people throughout the world that accept the irrefutable proof that there is a God and so they say to themselves "There must be a God and I am going to meet him at the end so I better clean up my life and get ready to meet him." There are lots of people who do that, loved ones. There are many Muslims that do it, many Buddhist that do it, many good, honest, sinners who have no belief in Christianity yet have that kind of reaction. Saving faith is not that. It's not believing certain things about God and then doing certain things in your life that are in accordance with that. That isn't saving faith.

Saving faith is a definite belief in what God has said; that all of us, every one of us in this room, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that the wages of sin is death, and we believe that. We believe that our lives have a great deal of self in them and a great deal of desire for our own way. Many of us have resented and criticized our parents, things that people were killed for in the Old Testament. And we believe that there are, in our hearts, many things that God has declared will never enter heaven. There is envy, and anger and jealousy, often, in our hearts. We read God's word and it says "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:21) And we realize that we have no chance of living with God the way we are and that the only thing to be done is to change us completely, destroy us utterly, and recreate us absolutely new -- to create a new, fresh, pristine person that fills the airspace that we have filled up to this present time in this world.

Saving faith believes that and then it goes one step further -- it believes that God has already done that. It's a little like what happened after they dropped the bomb in Hiroshima. Do you remember some of the stories that witnesses of the scene immediately after the dropping of the bomb reported? They saw people standing in the street, apparently alive, until they went up to them and touched them. The person just fell to the ground, disintegrated. The incineration had been so fast that it was like the ash of a piece of wood in a fire. You know how it's burned, yet it still has the shape of the wood and it looks exactly like the log, but you just have to poke it and it all collapses? All it is -- is the ash -- still in the form of the wood. That's the way it was after the dropping of that bomb. The incineration was so fast that although the person looked whole and complete, they were simply a burnt out person -- just the form of the ash -- that fell immediately when you touched them.

The person that has saving faith realizes that that's what has happened. That all of us have been crucified with Christ and what we now see are the burnt out ashes of what we used to be. They have the form of a person but in eternity, in God's eyes, we are already destroyed. And a person with saving faith realizes that. They realize, "Lord I have no right to live on this earth -- you have already destroyed me in Jesus and I have no existence. Somebody will poke this ash of my body in 70 years and it will disintegrate and there will be nothing left. Lord, I have no existence unless you have recreated somebody with my name in your son Jesus.

A person with saving faith realizes that that's exactly what God has done. That he has remade them in his son Jesus' resurrection, and there is a new person with their name that they are able to begin to manifest on this earth. And they rush to Jesus and say, "Lord I have no existence outside you. I come to you, Savior, asking you to manifest this new person in me. Enable me to be recreated, born again, and to begin a new life." So they grasp Jesus with all their heart and with all their soul and they pull him to themselves. And in response, God sends the spirit of his son into their hearts so that burnt out ash is filled with a new spirit and a new life and a completely new person. Then begins a new life -- a new creation completely -- the old has passed away. That's what saving faith is.

Now what is it to be weak in that faith? Do you see that it does mean you have the faith? Weakness in faith is weakness in faith. It's not, no faith. Weakness in your pitching arm means you still have a pitching arm and it does pitch, it just needs to be exercised and strengthened, but you do have a pitching arm. Being weak in faith means you have faith, you have saving faith, but you are weak in it. Why are you weak in it? Many people are weak in it, strangely enough, because they believe they are saved by their faith. They think it's their faith that saves them. They don't realize that they can't get anything except what they got at the beginning and that if you ever move at all from that dear person on the cross, you'll have nothing. Everything you have received comes from him and his death. Everything is in his death that you need, and that's all that you need, but they don't realize it. They allow themselves to begin to think, "No, it's our perception of that death that saves us. It's our faith in that death that saves us." And they start to move out in that dangerous approach where they try to strengthen their faith.

It's a bit like people with eyesight -- the eyesight is only useful in that it sees objects -- that's the only purpose of eyesight. As long as they continue to look at objects, the eyesight is exercised and strengthened. The moment they start turning in and saying, "Oh I must strengthen my eyesight, I'll have to strengthen my eyesight" that moment their eyesight begins to weaken, because it isn't being used. It's the same with faith. The Bible says you are saved by grace. You are

saved by the grace of God recreating you in Jesus death and resurrection, that's what you are saved by. You are saved by his generosity in recreating you even while you were yet sinners -- that's the source of your salvation -- that's the continuing part of your salvation. That's what saving faith concentrates upon. That's where saving faith gets its value. But you are saved by grace through faith, not by faith. Faith is just the means through which you receive the power of what God did to you in Jesus on Calvary. But what Jesus did for you on Calvary is the ground and basis of your faith and the ground and basis of your salvation. And faith is only the means through which you receive that.

But it's amazing how many, who are really born of God, and come into a deep conviction of sin, and come into a real repentance of self, and come into an absolute desperate embracing and grasping of Jesus as their only hope and draw him into themselves and yet they start very soon after to reckon, "What we need to do now is strengthen our faith." And they start to try to strengthen something called faith that they believe is inside them. And the moment they start to turn their eyes upon their faith, they have to take their eyes off Jesus on the cross and his dear wounds, and the moment they do that, their faith, which gets its only meaning from Calvary, it begins to weaken itself. In other words, it's strange, but you become weak in faith, the moment you begin to try to strengthen your faith, thinking that it's your faith that saves you. The moment you turn from Jesus on the cross, that moment you have stopped being saved.

It's a bit like humility -- if you aim at humility, you'll miss humility. If you aim at Jesus you'll be made humble. If you start concentrating on your faith, you'll grow weak in faith. If you concentrate on Jesus and what has happened to you in him on Calvary, you'll become strong in your faith. But do you realize it's almost an occupational hazard in Christendom? Do you know how many of us say, "Well, I've got problems. I've got problems in my life. I am a Christian -- I am born of God -- but I've got problems and it's because my faith, isn't strong enough so I think I'll have to try to strengthen my faith." Then they say to themselves, "Now faith is belief plus obedience. So what I need is to be clear about what I believe. I need to understand more what I believe."

Do you realize that that's what feeds the absolutely massive Christian publishing business? Now, books are good, I'm for them -- they're a blessing. And tracts are good and they're a blessing. But loved ones, christendom is strewn with lives that are weak in faith -- they are intent on strengthening their faith by being clearer about what they believe. So they keep saying to themselves, "If we only understood it better. If only I understood more about the end times. If only I understood more about what was going to happen on judgment day. If only I understood more about the theories of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. If only I understood more about the theories of the atonement -- if I understood more about those things, then I know I'd get strong in my faith."

It's not your faith that saves you -- it's what God has done to you in Jesus, his son -- that's what saves you. That's the mystery that saves you -- it's as you're eternally grateful to God, even about the mystery, as you are grasping Jesus. And because you are not quite sure what he did for you, you have to grasp him all the harder because if you don't quite know what a guy is doing, you hold on faster. And it's as you hold on to him that you continue to be saved. But the moment you begin to try to strengthen your faith, you begin to get another separate little crutch under you. So there are many of us here who are saying to ourselves that if we could read more books, or could understand the Bible a little better, then our faith would become stronger.

And what loved ones don't realize is that it's the beginning of Satan leading them back to the state

of Adam before he fell from God's fellowship in the garden of Eden. Satan is trying to lead us back to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And he is beginning to whisper in your ear, "You know, your faith would be stronger if you had a better knowledge of what is good and what is evil in the spiritual life -- if you had a better understanding of what is right and what is wrong. If you could do that then you would be stronger in your faith." And all he is doing is trying to get you to substitute knowledge for the life that comes from your relationship with Jesus. So many of us sink from knowing him to knowing "it". Many of us sink from knowing the person of Jesus, who is infinite and limitlessly satisfying and fulfilling to us, and we turn to knowing an "it". We turn to knowing a set of beliefs; knowing revelation better, knowing what will happen in the last times better, knowing what this person says about that or what that person says about this -- knowing an "it". And gradually our faith becomes smaller and smaller until it disappears completely and there is no living, personal trust of Jesus. There is just a head full of dry facts about Christianity.

You might say, "Isn't it true that even the theologians will say the gospel and the new testament has kerygma in it?" Kerygma is a Greek word which means proclamation of what God has done in Jesus to us, so yes. But it's interesting, if you look at what the teaching is about. It's teaching the first Christians that ever lived on the earth some of the plain, ethical issues about marriage, about what our attitude to rulers and authorities should be, about what our attitude should be to open sin if it occurs in the church. It's teaching about clear, ethical issues that are new in that the Christian gospel was new at that time.

But whenever a person came to the apostles and said, "How do I pray" or "How can I be free from sin" or "I have trouble with bad temper, how can I be free from that?" the apostles didn't recommend a book on temperament. They didn't. And yet, loved ones, you know the situation -- we're shot through with it. We are wearing ourselves out teaching, teaching, and teaching. And we dumb guys that are teaching think we are brilliant because you all want teaching! The apostles didn't tackle it that way. They said, "There is one place where you get everything -- God did to you in Jesus all that is needed in your life -- so seek the wounds of Christ. Get back to Jesus. Get on your knees and ask him, 'Lord, what have you delivered me from in your death that I need to have manifested in my life today?'" And he, through his Spirit, would reveal it and it would come as power to you and you would be really delivered. You wouldn't be delivered from your bad temper for a week until you read the next book on temperament. You'd be delivered and changed. And so the apostles spent all their ministries saying what Paul was saying in I Corinthians 2:2 "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." In other words Paul was saying, "I did not come to you with words of worldly wisdom, I came to you with one message, Christ and him crucified."

There is a mystery and a miracle that God did for you in Jesus that he didn't do for me. There is a mystery and a miracle that God did for, and in, each one of us in Jesus' death and resurrection. That is the power of God to us. If you ask me how -- there is only one answer. When Mary asked, "How shall this be -- that this little one would be born inside me who would become Emmanuel?" (Luke 1:34) The angel gave the answer, only one answer, to "how" in verse 35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." The Holy Spirit will miraculously bring to you what happened to you in Jesus. He will make it real to you -- he will make it real in you. And then you'll be independent of all of us would-be leaders.

And that's what the New Testament said, "You have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything." (I John 2:26) Loved ones, where we started our new birth is where we have to abide. That's why the old hymns said, "At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away. Because there by faith I received my sight

and now I'm happy all the day." "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died." It's at the cross. It's in Jesus. It's never further than the cross. That's where everything is. If you say, "I don't know how to think about that" you have to get on your knees. You have to go to God and you have to ask him to show you. He is the only one who can show you. What man can show you isn't worth knowing. What man can teach you won't deliver you because it's not a matter of strengthening the belief part of faith. It's a matter of gazing upon Jesus and spending time with him and asking him to explain and reveal to you what he did for you in his death on Calvary. And as you do that, your faith will become strengthened.

And that's why this verse says, "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions." Not to arguments, not to a preoccupation with, "Let me show you what's going to happen in the end times" or "Let me show you my explanation of revelation." Don't do that. Because that feeds in every human being the worst that Satan uses -- that desire for more knowledge, more "stuff" that we can understand and therefore we can control. There's only way to have saving faith and that's by seeing that God has changed you in his son Jesus. And he is more than willing to show you how he has changed you. If you ask him that, as the days follow and your life unfolds, you'll begin to see that being made real in your own heart and life. So, he who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes and arguments.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we are so used to doing things ourselves and so used to finding answers in the human sphere that we can see how we have been seduced. And Lord we repent of that. Father, you said in Ecclesiastes "of making many books there is no end" and we know that books are good and have much value as they elaborate what you did for us in Jesus on Calvary. But Lord we see that we have too often gone for the gospel of Jesus -- plus. Jesus, plus, is understanding of psychology. Jesus, plus, is understanding of human temperament. Jesus, plus, is training. Lord we see there is Jesus only. Jesus is the alpha and the omega -- the beginning and the end.

Lord Jesus, you can only save us when we go for you only. While we think we have some other means of salvation you'll leave us to ourselves. So Savior we come back to you, to the place where we first met God. And we would abide at the foot your cross. And we would abide in you on the cross and allow the Holy Spirit to raise us in your resurrection and ascension.

Lord, we thank you. Thank you that this is so simple that a person who cannot read can find the way. We thank you for your great kindness in arranging it like that. We thank you, Lord that with the heart of salvation is a friendship with Jesus, our Savior.

Now, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore. Amen.