

## Weak Faith or Impenitence?

Romans 14.01g

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Loved ones, will you take a Bible and turn to Romans 14:1, "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions." This is about the fifth Sunday we have been studying this verse, and the reason is that all of us here know that faith is probably the most vital thing you have to have in your life and yet the fact is that many of us are still vague about what faith is. And even though I think all our hearts have been touched by God over these Sundays as we have seen different ones of us come forward and settle things with Jesus firmly as our Savior, yet I think there are still some of you who will watch that thinking, "I think I have done that and yet I am not absolutely satisfied."

I think there are some of you that hear someone here testifying to being healed by God, or you hear someone else talking about how great the bible study is that they have each day, or how great their daily prayer time is, and you say, "I don't feel those things; I haven't experienced being healed by God, and I don't too much look forward to reading the Bible, but I think that's just because my faith is weak." The great tragedy is that if you reflect for a moment, your faith has been weak since you got it and it hasn't grown any stronger over the past five or ten years. You keep saying, "I don't have the burden for souls that other people have" or "I like Campus Church but I don't feel too much that I have to go abroad, or I don't feel too much that I have to tell other's about Jesus. I think it's just my faith is not the same as others faith; in some ways it's weaker and some ways it's stronger."

That kind of vagueness, unfortunately, results in great vagueness about your own spiritual relationship to God, and you know that. You know that whatever is right or wrong in your comments about weak or strong faith, you still end up with great vagueness about your relationship to God. Now faith itself, ordinary faith, is not difficult to define because we all use it every day, everybody uses faith. Faith is just belief that certain things are true and action in accordance with those beliefs. So we all use faith, all of us; whether we are Christian or Hindu or Buddhist or Spiritualist or Islam; we all use faith.

We all believe the air is pure in this auditorium, so we breathe it. That's faith; it's belief about the purity of the air, and its action in light of that belief. If we hear that the Twin City purity index is very dangerous, then we avoid breathing the outside air -- so we act on our beliefs. Every morning, because of your observation of repeated facts, you go out confidently believing that if you turn your ignition key in the car it will start. So you go out there in faith, and you put the key in -- even though there are mornings when it doesn't work that way -- you still have faith that it will work that way.

All of us exercise unbelievable faith in bankers; you go up to a desk where there's a cashier whom you have never seen in your life before, an absolute stranger -- and you gaily hand all your money over to them. You've absolute faith that it will be there the next day. The only thing you could question more than bankers is computers, and yet we have absolute faith that those old computers will keep those records right for us. And of course we exercise great faith in the stock market -- any of the stock markets operate purely on faith. Those in that chaos[on the trading floor], where those guys are raising their hands, it's just simply word of mouth and a handshake; there's absolute

faith in the transaction that involves thousands of dollars. In medicine we exercise great faith in doctors whom, again, we don't often know any better than the cashier, and yet we do what they tell us to do. So everybody exercises faith -- everybody.

We couldn't live without faith; the whole world is built on faith; the whole of the Wall Street operation, the whole of the reaction of the nation to recession is built on absolute faith. It's a belief that certain things are true and its action on the basis of that belief. Now loved ones isn't it true that many of us exercise that same kind of general faith about God? Again, whether we are Christian or Buddhist, whether we are Spiritualist or Christian Scientist, we apply that same kind of general faith to God. We believe that the laws of gravity will operate tomorrow. Even if we were in Australia we believe that if we go outside in the morning we won't fall off the bottom of the world but that the laws of gravity will operate. So we confidently go out of our house without tying ourselves to the floor! We apply that to God also; all of us who are theist -- Hindus, Muslims, Spiritualists, all of us who believe there is a God, we apply that same kind of faith to God. We say, "Behind the laws of gravity there is a God." Now many of us go further than that; we for instance in our Christian tradition say, "We believe that this God cares for us and that he is willing to forgive us for our sins because of his son's death on Calvary." The Muslims put it slightly differently, the Hindus put it slightly differently; but they all believe that same kind of thing. They may not believe in exactly the same nature of God, they may not believe that the salvation is exactly the same, but with that general faith they observe the things that have taken place in their world and they believe certain things about God.

They actually do what we do; you believe there's a God, you believe Jesus is a son, you believe that God forgives us because of Jesus' death and therefore you act in accordance with that. You come to church; you go to bible study, you pray, you give money to Christian causes. Hindus do same thing; they believe certain things about God, so they do certain things, they act in a certain way.

In a sense all of us are involved, in some way, in general faith like that. But that general faith does not bring about the mighty change in the heart that changes a person from the inside, it doesn't. That general faith is what all religious people share. But that general faith does not bring about the mighty change that God promised he would work in our hearts in a new birth through sending the Spirit of his son into us and changing the motivation of the center of our lives so that we became different people. That general faith does not bring that about, loved ones. I think many of us here this morning have that general faith. You are dear friends of mine, you are dear people, and you are some of the greatest people that I have ever met. Many of us have that general faith in God; we do our best to live according to the Christian standards and to live up to the best that we know, but loved ones, that general faith is not what brings about the new birth. That general faith is what we've called "believe-ism" and sometimes today it's called "easy believe-ism" because the idea is that that mental, volitional adaptation of our personalities is the new birth --it isn't. There is no work of God whatever in that, no work of God; it is all a work of man.

I know because I lived in that general faith for a long time and I used my mind to size things up and I used my will to govern my actions. But there was no mighty, supernatural work done in my heart or my spirit. And I think many of you experience frustration because you hear many of us talking about faith and you say, "Well that's the faith I have, I believe exactly what you said. I believe it." Yes, but there's been no mighty work done in your heart and so you are not born of God. He has not sent the Spirit of his son into your life, because you're involved only in general faith and general faith will never enable God to work the new birth in you. That requires saving faith.

Saving faith is a very different entity. I'll show you, loved ones, in the Bible where it is mentioned. It's in Ephesians, Chapter 2:8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith." That's saving faith -- faith that saves; "For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." General faith is a belief that there is a God, that Jesus is his son, and that Jesus has died to enable God to forgive you for your sins. Therefore you commit yourself to live by the golden rule and by Christian precepts as well as you can -- that's general faith. Saving faith is a deep, intense, conviction that this is not your own doing, and that you are so shot through with sin and selfishness, with distrust of God, with independence of him, that unless he absolutely destroys all that you are at this present time and remakes you there is no hope for you at all -- that's saving faith.

Now loved ones, that requires honesty, humility, an absolute distrust of self that is not present in Buddhism, in Islam, in Hinduism, in any of the great religions of the world and in most of the sects that we have in our country. Saving faith is only possible if God has in fact destroyed you utterly in his son Jesus and remade you. And saving faith is faith that you need to be saved. It's faith that you cannot, with all your goodness, with all your adaptation of your behavior to the things that you believe, you cannot save yourself; you cannot do anything to improve yourself. You are so shot through with sin and selfishness that the only thing that can be done is to destroy you and remake you. In other words, saving faith is an absolute conviction that you are already dead in Jesus, that there is no "you" left -- no "you" as you have remembered you over the years -- and that the only way God can fill that airspace that you used to occupy is through his son Jesus, in whom he has created a new you. Therefore you'll rush to Jesus to find that person, because until you find that person, you regard yourself as non-existing -- that's saving faith. It's an absolute total turning from yourself and an absolute turning to Jesus. It's an absolute confidence that he alone can recreate any being in you because the being that you have been deserves nothing but to be destroyed.

That's what God has done in Christ. That's what saving faith is. Saving faith has little of the up on your hind legs; the noble pagan kind of doing what he believes is best to try to please his God, saving faith is not as proud as that at all. Saving faith is a humble, all repenting, self-surrendering trust in Jesus only; regarding yourself as deserving nothing but to be destroyed in him. Now what is the element that distinguishes saving faith from general faith? Personal appropriation of Jesus' death and resurrection to yourself, that's it. Not regarding all that as true just for me or for somebody else, but for you; personal appropriation of Jesus' death and resurrection to yourself; as occurring for you only, as if you had been the only person in the whole world -- that would still have happened because God loves you so much -- personal trust in Jesus, a personal encounter with him.

Now, what makes that possible? Only one thing, -- repentance; a deep repentance makes it possible for a person to turn to Jesus and personally appropriate Jesus to himself. In other words it is going to Jesus and saying, "Lord, I deserve only to be wiped out, I am such a mess -- I am so shot through with selfish motives, but I can't begin to disentangle them; I need to be completely remade, Lord Jesus and that, I believe, is what happened in you. Tell me what you've made me and whatever you show me, I'll walk clear of it, I'll walk away from it." That's what repentance is; it's going to Jesus and embracing him as your only hope. In other words loved ones, repentance is completely turning from what you are today; convinced that that is utterly wrong, and simply turning only to Jesus. Repentance comes from believing God's word. Here are some of his words, if you would look at

them. Its some of the Old Testament; Leviticus chapter 19:17. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bare any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." Repentance is taking that to yourself and saying, "Lord, I've hated my brother in my heart, I have resented my brother in my heart, and so there is something in me that is not like you, but something in me that opposes you. There is something that isn't good in me." It's a readiness to say with Paul, in Roman 7:18, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh." It's really as if to say to God, "I am not like that." Repentance is not saying, "Well, I sometimes might have hated my brother, but I don't hate him all the time and I don't have resentment against people all the time. And I don't want to take vengeance all the time." That's like saying, "I've only a little bit of cancer inside me. I have only a little bit; it won't do me much harm." Real repentance is saying, "Lord, I'm not like that; I do hate my brother; I do have resentment against other people; I do have critical thoughts and critical feelings about people. I've maybe not cursed my parents, as you say those who do should die, but I've often wished that they were far away. I wished that they were not a nuisance to me. I've wanted, in my heart, the things that you say are wrong. Lord, I need to be changed completely and utterly," that's it.

There is a verse that, I think we just skirt around; I think we bluff ourselves on it. It couldn't be plainer or more definite, but we have continually avoided it because it convicts us of our sin. Galatians 5:19: "Now the works of the flesh are plain : fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like." We have a tendency to think of the fornication or the licentiousness, or to think of the things maybe we are not involved in. But it does say anger and jealousy and envy and the like. "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Loved one's, real repentance is honesty with God: it's saying, "Lord I have had those things in my heart: I have had envy in my heart, I have had anger and jealousy in my heart, Lord God, if I keep these inside me, I'll go only to one place at the end of this life. Father, I need to be destroyed and remade again in your son Jesus." Repentance is coming to Jesus and saying, "Lord, I need that -- what you have done for me -- that's what I need done. Explain it to me personally, Lord Jesus. What pain did I cause you by my sin?" That's repentance loved ones. And it's only repentance that enables a person to experience saving faith, because saving faith is desperation, its desperation. Saving faith is a desperate grabbing at Jesus, and then embracing him and saying, "You are my only hope." That's the only thing that pulls the eternal son out of heaven into this temporal earth. It's the strong, desperate yearning of a heart that sees that it is lost unless Jesus engages with it in some way. This is a very personal thing -- that's why the gates of hell can't prevail against it. That's why it doesn't depend on Pope or preacher or anybody else. It depends on two people -- you and Jesus. And when you have that kind of relationship with him, then you will go through that moment at the end with peace.

I don't think it's unfair of me to point to the simple reality of that because we all know it: there will come a moment after you breathe the last breath, when there's outer space and nothing else, we all know that. Now at that moment, you need to know the only one who has control of that space; you need to know your Savior. You need to know there is Jesus, who has allowed the flames of his Father's wrath to burn out all your sin in him. You need to come to him now, not just for the sake of the future, but for the sake of the sheer reality of it -- this man has done this for you. You can have saving faith today, you know that. It's up to your own heart.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we bow before you. We are sorry for the rationalizing of our sins; we can see that it's an alternative to what you have done for them. We think if we persuade ourselves they're not so bad, we'll be all right. But Lord we know that your Father said the wages of sin is death and that's the only thing that can be done with them, they have to be destroyed. And Lord Jesus they are such a part of us, a part of the warp and woof of our own lives, part of the veins and the blood vessels that we have, a part of our brains and our feelings -- Lord it seems that we ourselves had to be destroyed and remade.

Lord Jesus as we believe that you have done that for us in Calvary, we believe that it is a manifestation of the remaking of us that your Father brought about in eternity. So Lord we come to you now, and Lord Jesus we ask you to show us your wounds and show us what sins of ours made those wounds. And Lord if you bore those sins in your body on the cross, then we see there's no reason for us to continue to bare them. And there's no need at all for us to practice them, whatever they are and however closely they come to us and how persistent they have been. If you have borne them to death on Calvary, then Lord we know we can walk free of them this moment; we can turn from our sins, we can turn from our wicked ways, and we can repent and turn completely to you. And so Lord Jesus, in these silent moments, we would each one make our peace with you. Lord, we ask you to come into our lives, then to our hearts. Will you run them from this day forward and we'll obey you. We'll begin to listen for your speaking through the Bible and through prayer. We thank you Lord Jesus. Thank you Father for sending the Spirit of your son into our hearts. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forevermore. Amen