

## OBEDIENCE OR LEGALISM?

ROMANS 14:02

by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Let's imagine that you are not feeling too well and so you go to the doctor and he says to you, "So, you are not feeling well?" You say, "No, I'm really not." And he says, "You do look very pale." Then you sit up and say, "I could get more sunshine; it's true -- I'm not getting much sun because I sit in a lot. Maybe I could get out in the sunshine more and I wouldn't look so pale. And maybe I could go to some of those tanning studios. And now that I think of it, I have some of that lotion in my drawer at home that prevents sunburn and helps you tan at the same time. Maybe I could use that, so maybe I wouldn't look so pale." And at that point, he is just sitting back, staring, and says, "Stop, stop. Paleness isn't the problem, I just said you look pale but that isn't the problem -- it's what causes the paleness that's the problem and that's what I have to discover and diagnose and treat."

"You could do all those things that you were suggesting, you could get all the sunshine you wanted, you could put suntan-lotion on and you could come back looking the picture of health, but the sickness would still be deep down inside. All you would have done is to remove the symptoms so that it would be harder for us both to understand what the real problem was. Now tell me, do you have any other symptoms?" So you sit back, and we all want to produce what he wants to hear, so we say, "Yeah, I feel tired at times. In fact sometimes I feel so tired I feel almost like I'm going to faint. But now that I mentioned that, I could get more sleep. I think I could get more sleep. I could get more sleep at night and maybe not get up quite so early in the morning. And maybe I could take some of those pills that would give me more get up and go. And I haven't had a vacation for a long time, maybe that's the problem."

And he is going glassy eyed again! "I said, stop -- stop! You are at it again; it's not the tiredness that's the problem, that's just a symptom. I just asked had you any other symptoms? But that is not the problem, that's just a symptom. Your tiredness is caused by something else and that's what we have to discover together. And you could do all the things that you are doing with the tiredness, maybe it would help for you to get more sleep, maybe it wouldn't be bad for you to have more rest. But normally, your natural responses have prompted you to try all those things before you came to me. And the reason you came to me is you need help. You need someone to heal you or someone to do something for you that you can't do yourself. Now let's get down to it; let's try to find out what the sickness is that is underneath this tiredness and this paleness."

So the doctor does some tests on you and he diagnoses anemia and prescribes iron for you and in two months time you are feeling completely different and you are healed. Yet you are only healed because you were able to go to someone who was able to look below the symptoms and to deal with the real sickness. If you hadn't done that, it is conceivable that you would have run around for months, and even some of us for years; treating the symptoms; removing one symptom after another and yet still deep down feeling sick and the sickness producing ever-new symptoms day after day. And you really never are getting any better.

You know yourself that we, in this present world, are used to having to go to doctors at times, when we can't solve the thing ourselves. We are used to going to plumbers, when we can't solve problems with our plumbing; we are used to going to electricians when we can't solve problems with our

electrical system. We are used to going to lawyers when we can't solve some legal problem. We are used, often, to going to professionals and putting ourselves in their hands and saying, "Look, will you do something for us? We can't deal with these ourselves." And yet you all know that they couldn't do anything for you if you keep getting into the act yourself. If you keep trying to fix these things yourself, they'll finally say, "All right, you do it, carry on until you run out of energy or until you run out of your own resources; until you get out of my way, and then I'll do something for you." We all know that in our own lives.

Now it's just the same in our relationship with God. It's just the same thing: God speaks to us very clearly about certain things in our lives. Let's just look at one of them that we've mentioned before in past weeks in Exodus 21:17: "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death." We have a great tendency to say, "Oh, I'm glad we are not under the old Covenant, otherwise we'll be put to death for cursing our father or mother, or for wishing them out of the way, or for being irritated by them, or feeling that they were such a disadvantage, or so cruel to us. I'm glad that Jesus has died so that I wouldn't have to be put to death for that." And God says to us this morning, "You are trying to do the same thing as the person who went to the doctor because you are saying 'I'm glad Jesus has died for that and I'm not going to do it any more. I'm not going to curse my father and mother; I'm not going to wish them out of the way.'" And God says, "You are just dealing with the paleness, that's all you are doing. I know you think you're saying a very laudable thing when you say 'Lord, if I have to be put to death for doing that, then I'm not going to do it.'" But God says, "The cure for that is the one that is stated there, do you realize that: whoever curses his father or mother must be put to death. That's the cure for it, that's not the punishment. Now when you say, 'Oh, I'm not going to curse my father and mother, I'm going to stop doing that' all you are doing is dealing with the only thing you can deal with: the paleness, the tiredness -- you are dealing with the symptom. The sickness is still underneath. I'm not a wrathful God in the sense of a vengeful God; I'm not mad at you because you are cursing your father and mother so I'm going to put you to death because I'm mad at you -- that's not why. I am putting you to death because that's the only cure for the sickness that causes that symptom."

Of course, the Jews never did see that. God said to them, if you remember, "If you are right inside, in your relationship with me, you'll have no other Gods before me. You won't make graven images to yourself. You won't steal, you won't murder, and you won't commit adultery; you won't do these things if you are right inside in your relationship with me." The Jews got up on their hind legs in the Old Testament and said, "If you don't want us to do those things, we won't do those things: we won't steal, we won't kill, even though we want to, we won't." And they compounded their independence by determining to produce the symptoms of dependence, independently. They compounded their independence of God by determining to produce the symptoms of dependence on God independently: they got themselves into a twisted, perverted attitude to God's law.

God's law is not there to be obeyed. God's law is not there, first and foremost, to be obeyed. What is it there for then? I'll show you; it's Romans 7:7, "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" The purpose of the law is to expose sin. Verse 13: "Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure." That's the purpose of the law. The purpose of the law is to show us that there is something rotten inside; there is a sickness inside us that is producing these symptoms that are labeled adultery, murder, stealing, anger, bitterness, criticism.

The purpose of the law is to list those symptoms and say, "There's something rotten inside you; you are sick even unto death. There is an independence of God inside you that is so all pervasive, that it is absolutely dominating your life. There is an independence of God that is so through and through rooted and radically grounded inside you, that it's going to bring you to death if you let it continue." That's what the law does. Our only response to it can be, "Lord, the sickness is there, there is something inside me that's wrong in my relationship to you. Lord will you show me what it is? Will you show me what you destroyed in Jesus that causes me to be like this?" Only the laser beam of the Holy Spirit can cut those things out of your body without destroying you, yourself. And the only right response to the Gospel is, "Lord Jesus, you destroyed what needed to be destroyed in Calvary, will you reveal it to me so that I can let it go and believe it to death in me?" All else is legalism. Do you see how much beside the point it is for you to say, "Well I'm going to be a good Christian; I am going to stop my anger." God is saying to you, "Stop it. Go to my son Jesus on the cross and find out what he destroyed in you that causes you to be angry. Seek the wounds of Christ and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what the sickness is inside you -- that's what repentance is. Repentance is not a lot of tears; it's not a lot of regret or remorse. Repentance isn't even lining yourself up with all the laws that everybody gives you. Repentance is going to the Savior and saying, "Lord Jesus. What did you do on Calvary to deliver me from this inward sin that is causing these outward symptoms?"

Repentance is going to Doctor Jesus and saying, 'Doctor Jesus, I have trouble here, I have a paleness that shows itself in dishonesty; I have a tiredness here that shows itself in dirty mindedness. I have something wrong with me that is spewing up all kinds of symptoms, now Doctor Jesus, will you tell me what happened to me, in you, on Calvary, that will deliver me from this?' That's what real repentance is. Remember a couple of Sundays ago we said that some of us missed faith because we thought we were saved by faith? That is, we think we're saved by our faith, rather than by grace; by the grace of what God has done to us in Jesus. We tend to think we are saved by faith and we break faith up into to belief and obedience.

We say, "It's important then that I strengthen my faith, because that's what saves me. So I have to be clear about what I believe; I have to line it up; what do I believe about abortion, what do I believe about political freedom, what do I believe about the death penalty, what do I believe about what Christians should do about prayer?" And we concentrate on belief things. It's like humility: when you aim at humility, you miss it. When you aim at Jesus, you get it. When you concentrate on the belief part of your faith, you miss faith entirely because it's not what you believe, it's whom you believe. It's the same with the other side -- obedience. We tend to say, "Obedience is the other part of faith, and I am saved by my faith. So I have to strengthen my obedience. So now I have to concentrate on what to obey: what should Christians do? Should they eat meat? Should they eat vegetables? What should they do? What should be their attitude to this political issue? What should be their attitude to this theological issue? We concentrate on what to do, and what we should obey, instead of whom we should obey. Now that's it: it's whom we should obey. It is coming to Jesus and saying, "Lord Jesus, your dear Spirit can tell me what was destroyed in you, in me, on Calvary. Now will you tell me that, and I'll turn from that?" That's what faith is.

Faith is not legalism. It's not this business that Paul was talking about, where you remember he says one person believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables. It's not that, that's not what faith is about. Faith isn't about legalistically obeying this or that. Faith is a matter of using the law to show you some symptoms in your life that tell you that you are a sinner. And then you go to Doctor Jesus and say, "Lord Jesus, on Calvary you destroyed this thing in me. Will you reveal to me what it is?" That's why I have said to you several times this past

month -- cling to Jesus. He alone can show you. The rest of us here, oh, we can give you great opinions of what you should do and how rotten you are compared with us and all the rest of it. We can all write books and tell what you should do and what you should be, and why you're wrong. Doesn't matter any of it: there's nothing to do with your salvation because God is speaking to you [pointing to the audience] about one thing and to you about another and to you about another and to me about another and it's not that thing that he is speaking about; it's something inside us, that we can't even see and that Jesus alone has dealt with. The Lord Jesus has borne something in you that is independent of God and destroyed it, that he has not borne for any of the rest of us in this room. There is something that Jesus has done for you that he has not done for anybody else in the whole universe. You have to find that out by going to him and asking him. And when he reveals it to you, you simply walk into it, and you find you're free from it. It's a miracle; the moment you see it, you can walk free from it because you know it's dead and you are freed from it.

So, have you ever gone to him like that? Have you ever gone to him with the things in your life -- you know what they are. There are things in your life that aren't right. Now those are the symptoms to show you that you are sick unto death -- and Jesus has taken that sickness away from you: he has destroyed it in himself. Now, he can reveal that to you, if you approach him personally. That's what faith is: it's believing in Jesus, trusting in Jesus personally and obeying Jesus personally. That's why it's such a dignified position. You are not at the mercy of the rest of us. You are not at the mercy of all the great legalists; you live your own life, you and Jesus.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you. Thank you for your own perfect life. Thank you for the law in the Bible that exposes the fact that we are not right with God; that we are not resting in our Father's love, that we are not trusting him. Lord Jesus, thank you. But it doesn't just mean we are bad -- maybe we are bad; maybe we are criminal, but Lord, that isn't the worst of it. The worst of it is, we are criminal or we are bad, because we're sinfully independent of God and we are not trusting him as our dear Father and we are not respecting him as our Father. So Lord Jesus, this thing inside us has been there a long time and we do believe that you have written it out in yourself. Lord, we ask you to reveal it to us: reveal to us in what way we do not trust our Father in heaven; in what way we are not really obeying him. Lord Jesus, will you reveal that to us? Oh Savior! We ask you to do this, even this morning. The grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us.