

Only One Judge

Romans 14:4

by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Romans 14:4, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand."

There are different ways in which you and I can build prisons for ourselves. In other words, you can build a dungeon for yourself. It's God's will that we should fly high and free, that we should be at liberty; that in our hearts and in our spirits, we should be light as birds. That's his will for us -- that we should be happy people. But we have a tendency to build dungeons for ourselves: little dark prisons where we're chained to walls by manacles so that we can't move by either our wrists or our ankles.

We find ourselves encased in iron; the iron of our wills or the iron of our own minds. And we find we've lost the freedom that we either once knew as children or we once knew even as children of God. There are different ways to build these prisons but one of the ways that we're talking about this morning is connected with an attitude that we all are born with, and if you let that attitude develop inside you, it creates a prison for you, either before you become a child of God or after you become a child of God.

A particular attitude is an attitude that we inherited even from our dear parents; it's just inherent in human nature. It's the attitude that we know what is right for ourselves and we know what is right for everybody else -- that's it. And it's incredible loved ones, how long that not only lasts in all of us even after we become, as we say, Christian, but how subtly it develops in us even as our life passes; this feeling that we know what is right for ourselves and we know what is right for everybody else. It's the attitude that was referred to way back in this dear book [the Bible] in Genesis, where Satan said to Eve, "Listen, if you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you'll be like God at knowing the difference between good and evil." That's the attitude: the feeling that we are gods; that we know what is right for us and that we actually know what is right for everybody else.

It's funny, though we may say, "Oh brother, me a god? I have a terrible self-image. I have no self-esteem, I have no self-worth, I have a terrible inferiority complex. But I am a god: I am a god with an inferiority complex, but I am a god. I am a god with poor self-esteem: but I am a god. I am a god with no self-worth: but I am a god."

Deep, deep down in all of us, even though it's absolutely paradoxical, we have this feeling that we know what is right for us and we know what is right for everybody else and that gets such a grip on our lives that it often steals all lightness and joy and happiness from our hearts because in actual fact, we're not gods.

Each of us here are little finite creatures full of mistakes, full of errors, full of things that we don't understand, full of things that we can't control and when we try to walk as great gods, the weight bears down upon us and oppresses us and destroys our happiness. We can walk bright and happy if we walk as finite creatures and little children of God, but if we try to walk as great gods that know exactly how everything should be for everybody else and for ourselves, then the sheer weight

and oppression of that will bring frustration to us and we'll walk in a prison.

Now loved ones, the amazing thing is, we were born in that attitude. That's what theology says: it calls that attitude 'original sin', and the Bible says we were actually born in that. It's in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." That doesn't refer to who David's mother was, it refers to the fact that all of us were brought into a world; a psychological world, a spiritual world, a physical world, an emotional world, a volitional world, a mental world that is utterly shot through with this feeling, "I know best: I may be stupid, I may be uneducated, I may be poor, I may be hopeless, I may not be the brightest and best, but I know best." We're caught in that and we're born with that attitude.

Funny thing, the attitude itself is not bad until it begins to produce things in our life, and of course it does that very quickly, but that basic attitude is what sin is, you see. What you and I get caught in is the idea that sin is all kinds of other things -- but that's what sin is.

Of course, the tragedy is that many of us allow our legitimate authorities to reinforce this illegitimate authority. I don't know that there's a parent here, or a teacher or a boss that will not agree with this fact: that you have a legitimate responsibility as a Father or a Mother to train your children, to correct them; to point out what's wrong. But the tragedy for many of us moms and dads is we allow that to feed the illegitimate feeling that we're right in everything, and before we know it we're everybody's Father and Mother.

We're not only the children's Father and Mother, but we're everybody's. We don't only know what is right for the children, at the times when we do actually know what is right, but we tend to think we know what is right for the children when actually we don't know what is right for them. So the legitimate authority reinforces the illegitimate authority and we begin to find ourselves imprisoned in our function; imprisoned in forever being a Father and Mother; imprisoned in forever evaluating our children; imprisoned in forever checking out whether they're right or wrong and therefore losing the freedom to be a brother or a sister or a friend to them, at those moments when God allows us to be.

So we find that this feeling that we are right and we know what is right, being exercised not only in the legitimate functions that we have, but becoming the very habit of our lives. I can certainly speak of it from the other angle -- not as a parent -- but if you have a position of authority in your job or your business or your workplace or in church where you're always responsible, you know how it goes for telling people how to do this and how to do that and telling them where they're wrong and where they're right. It's so easy for that to become the mental habit of your life until you're always looking at people from the point of view of where they're right or where they're wrong and it becomes the very atmosphere in which you dwell and live.

That becomes your very breathing, and your very air, and your very blood, and of course it steals from you all joy because you're always totting up who is right here and who is wrong there. You always feel responsible for telling other people where they're right and where they're wrong, and if you don't get telling them, at least it registers inside your own little mind.

So your mind becomes filled with what's wrong with this person, what's not right with that person, how that person should do this, how this person shouldn't do that, instead of living as a free child of God: responsible for your own life and for those moments when you have to tell somebody as a Father and Mother, or you have to tell somebody as a boss and then escape from that as fast as you

can, back into freedom as a little child of the Father; acting before the Father in humility saying, "Lord, you alone know what is right and you alone know what is wrong."

Loved ones, it's very easy for us to become imprisoned in this kind of spot. I've tried to put it down because I thought it was so insidious; it's so easy for the habit of authority to become the only life you have inside: you get caught in your own function; you see yourself as an eternal Father, as an eternal Mother, as an eternal boss, as an eternal head of things and you get caught in that. Your habits of speech become filled with constant judgments on other people instead of doing your job of instruction or correction, then stepping back into the reality of being a humble child of God who enjoys the protection and guidance of God along with your colleagues. You continue to live in that dry, shallow, soil of your particular authority position and are deceived back into getting your nourishment from your knowledge of good and evil.

So you become an expert on whether abortion is right or whether it's states rights, right or wrong; whether you should read the Bible at a certain time, or pray at a certain time. You become an expert on all the do's and don'ts, and the goods and the bad's, and though you think you're living off the tree of life, you're actually living back in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Loved ones, it's so easy for us, as children of God, to fall back into that prison. We experience the liberty of being God's children. We realize that he wiped out all wrong in us and he dealt with it, but it's so easy to fall back into this and do you see the paradox of it at all? Jesus didn't die to destroy drunk driving. Drunk driving is wrong, but Jesus didn't die to destroy drunk driving. Jesus didn't die to destroy abortion. Abortion is wrong, but Jesus didn't die to destroy abortion. Strange enough, Jesus didn't die to destroy fornication, though fornication is wrong. Jesus died to destroy the feeling that we are gods and that we know what is best. Isn't that tragic -- that we who are blindly pointing our fingers and pontificating and telling people what is right and wrong, we are expressing the very sin that Jesus died to destroy; that feeling that you are God -- that's what will kill you.

I mean, the drunk driving will kill other people and it may kill you too, but the only thing that will kill you spiritually is that feeling inside that you know what is right for you and all the rest of us; where God is not your God, and you're not bowing down in humility saying, "Lord, teach me what is right to do next."

Loved ones, that's why Paul spoke as he did. Because he says the weak among you, those of you who are weak in your dependence upon God and who are still strong in your idea of what is right and wrong and what will get you to heaven, instead of strong in your dependence on God having made everything right in Jesus inside you -- those of you who are weak in the faith, that is; those of you who are weak in trusting that God has made everything right inside you and are strong in the idea that righteousness is doing this and not doing that -- those of you are weak, tend to accuse the strong."

You tend to say, "Look -- that's wrong and that's right and that's wrong and that's right." Paul says, "What right do you have to say that? A man is responsible to his own master, and you're not his master. Who are you to judge another person's servant? That servant is responsible to his own master; you leave him to his own master."

There comes a great freedom when you do it with your sons and daughters, and when we do it with our friends at work. It's really interesting; a great peace comes between you and them, a great peace.

They no longer feel you're judging them, -- so maybe they are sleeping around and that's wrong, and maybe they are drinking too much and that's wrong, but the moment you start accepting that it's not your job to judge them, but it's your job to have faith for them and love them, a great peace comes between them and you and they sense that. They no longer sense judgment, maybe it's good to remember; even the Holy Spirit doesn't judge us. Do you know that? Even God, apart from his judgment through the natural consequences of things -- through venereal disease producing physical consequences and that kind of thing, apart from that, God does not judge us in this world. Do you realize that?

Even the Holy Spirit doesn't judge us. The Holy Spirit convicts: he points out, "Now this is not trusting the Father, this is trusting yourself", but he doesn't judge. There will be no judgment, that is, there will be no condemnation to hell or no exultation to heaven until after death.

So loved ones when we judge other people we are taking upon ourselves, not simply a responsibility that God alone has, we are taking upon ourselves a responsibility that not even God undertakes during this lifetime. So when we judge another person, we're not only being God, we're being more than God. And that comes home to them and drives them from us.

That's why Paul says a man is responsible to his own master -- he is not responsible to you; you aren't his master. Who are you to judge another person's servant? Of course what he implies is it's even worse than that because, he says, "That person will stand because the Lord will make him stand." Why? Because whatever sin he is involved in, he isn't exercising the centrality of sin that you are in judging. Because the centrality of sin is being god: knowing what is right for you and for everybody else -- that's what real sin is. You are the one who won't stand.

So loved ones, you see the seriousness of the situation. Get out of the prison because it is a prison. It's a miserable, dark prison where you're involved in continually adding up pluses and minuses -- get out of that prison. Fulfill your obligation as a mom or a dad, or as a boss, and then get as far from that as you can as fast as you can. Get into the arms of Jesus and say, "Lord God, you alone know what is right and wrong and I leave them in your dear hands, I leave them with you."

Loved ones the moment you begin to live like that, the sheer love that comes from your heart and the acceptance of the other person that comes, will begin to open their hearts up like a flower and they'll begin to want to share with you because they sense that you, like your Savior, have not come to condemn the world but that the world, through you, might be saved. I pray that God will help all of us to live in that freedom. Let us pray.

Dear Father, many of us want to turn away from this sin that we've discussed today because we sense we've been caught in it. Even if we haven't pronounced judgments on other people, our dear heads have been filled with them: filled with "this person does this, and that person does the other." Lord we can see that the purposes of all of these fine pronouncements have one thing in common: to make us appear more clever or better, or to show us that we were right and everybody else was wrong.

Lord, forgive us and we will turn from this now, our Father. We thank you for the positions of authority that you have given us in our homes, in our businesses, in our churches; but Lord, we thank you that that's a very temporary thing that can be exercised in a few minutes here and there, and you want the habit of our minds not to be that of a god or a judge, but you want the habits of our minds to be that of a child: trusting its loving Father, forever asking his Father what he should do.

Lord, we want to live in that freedom and that liberty. We want to trust you with our friends and our colleagues and our children, and trust you, dear Holy Spirit, to do the convicting work that only you can do and we will give you plenty of room by staying out of your ministry.

So Lord, we thank you for this day. We thank you that this is a world that is free and is full and beautiful for your children and it is not a world where we have to be concerned with all the shadows and all the works of Satan. There's a world where we can be filled with your love and your joy and your peace and Lord we thank you for that.

The grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.