

## Encouragement Through The Word

Romans 15:4a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Those who are on campus will know Oak Street and many of us who have come off Highway 94; they may realize that on Oak Street, there is a church called Bethany Presbyterian. It's opposite Centennial Frontier Hall, and the dormitories. And it almost makes me feel, I love to say it, but it was almost nineteen years ago, this present month that I began to preach in Bethany Presbyterian and expound the Book of Romans in this Bible. And if you remember those days, if you were alive then, they were wild days. I even have one of the illustrations that I used in the sermon, so you can tell which days they were. There it is and it was old LBJ [former President of the USA], and he was fighting all of us and we were all fighting the Vietnam war or refusing to fight the Vietnam War and we had barriers up and barricades, you remember on the campus.

And the hippy movement was going full swing and everything was in chaos. I noticed this newspaper clipping and it's pretty yellow now, but it is the Vatican City, the world sends its Bishops by an overwhelming vote, asked Pope Paul Friday to issue a positive Pastoral Declaration on the doctrinal crises in the Roman Catholic Church, because of course the Catholic Church was beginning to lose its own bearings.

Those were days when everybody was challenging everything. We were anxious to overthrow the establishment, we were anxious for free love, we were anxious for drugs. We didn't know what we wanted but we seemed to want everything and not much of it was what we had, and there was general chaos here on campus at that time. I felt strongly that we didn't need just another voice of another man trying to suggest a possible basis for thinking, because of course that's what we all wanted. We were all desperate for some basis for our philosophy of life. We all wanted something on which we could build our way of thinking and our way of living. And I felt that we didn't need just another voice even with an Irish accent; just another man telling what he thought was right. But that what we needed, was some authoritative presentation of reality that both the speaker and the hearers could sit before, and be judged by. And so, that's why loved ones, I felt it was right nineteen years ago, for us all to start, studying this book [the Bible].

Of course there is only one human being in the world that has been different in quality from the rest of us. That is, there's only one human being that has not died like LBJ, or has not died like Pope John the XXIII, or has not died like Pope Paul, and that human being is not Mohammed or Buddha. They all died like dogs, died like ordinary human beings, and were buried and forgotten, except for their names. There's only one that is different from them, and that is the man Jesus of Nazareth -- and he died, and then came back from being dead and assured us that he had been alive long before he ever appeared here on earth, and that he was in fact the son of the Creator of our world. And that this book of course, recounts in greatest detail, the record of his life. That's why I felt it's right that we should go for something that is out beyond all of us human beings, something that has some absoluteness to it, something that we can all sit under, and be judged by, rather than judge.

And you remember of course that the record of his life is collaborated by people like Tacitus and Celsus and Pliny -- non-biblical writers that referred to Jesus -- but the greatest detail of his life is found in this book. And one of the things this man Jesus did say was, that even the first part of this book, was actually inspired by his father, the Creator of the world. So that even when

you read the first part, the Old Testament part, you're reading not ordinary words, but you're reading words in which the writers were so guided by our Creator, that they were unable to make any error, in what they said about us and our relationship to God and the purpose of our being here in life, and what way we should live this life.

And if you want to see that loved ones, it's in 2 Peter 1:20. And so we started 19 years ago, with Jesus; as somebody who was different in quality from the rest of us human beings, somebody who had to overcome death and had shown an ability to leave the earth and come back to it. He was our authority. Then we noticed what he says about the first part of this book, and here's what he says, through his disciple Peter, in verse 20. "First of all you must understand this that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man." So, Jesus taught Peter, and Peter writes here, "No prophecy," even in The Old Testament, "came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

And so, it's just obvious that Jesus, who is obviously different from the rest of us in quality, he believed the first part of this book is written by men who were moved by the Holy Spirit of our Creator and therefore it is an inspired book. And then of course, He pointed out that the last part of this book is also inspired. It's in 2 Peter 1:16, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."

In other words this New Testament is reliable itself, and is inspired. So, we began to see that this book is not just like Shakespeare's "Hamlet", it's not just like Plato's "Republic". This book is written by one who can see all of life in its perspective, and who can see all of life in the right balance, and it seemed right in those chaotic years 19 years ago, that that's what we should study. We should study not just what this man thought he would speak about this Sunday or what this person thought because they were interested in a certain issue but that we should Sunday by Sunday, sit under the explanation that has been given to us of life by our own God, the Creator of the world. And that we should not only study truths, but study them in the perpetual, in the particular balance that God had given them with other truths. And we should study them and look at them through his eyes and through his mind.

And of course, all through the centuries of mankind's history this book has always had that position of authority. It's always been in that spot, it's always been in that place that is described there in verse 19, "And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." And we men and women, however far away we have strayed from God, have always sensed that this is a different kind of book. This is just a different kind of animal, to any other literature. This book is inspired in a way that Milton isn't, this book is inspired in a way that no literature is inspired. This book comes from the hand of our Creator; it is our God, giving his explanation of reality and his directions to us for our lives. This is the book that the Archbishop of Canterbury presents to any King or Queen that is crowned in England. And he says, "Take this, the most precious gift this world possesses." Coleridge, the English poet said, "This book finds me at a deeper depth of my being, than any other book." Would you believe it -- that the civil laws of almost every nation in the earth are based on the first five books of this Bible? That this is the thing that actually continues to hold any kind of order together in our world? So, those are some of the reasons we began to study it nineteen years ago.

There is another reason of course. This book is supernatural. When Coleridge says, "It finds me at a deeper depth of my being than any other book," he means, God is still alive and he speaks to you and me personally through this book. Karl Barth was an old German theologian who said a lot of things that are questionable, but one of the good things he said was, "Never think when you are listening to this book that you are listening to the word of some country preacher. When you are listening to the words of this book, you are listening to the creator Himself speaking straight to your heart. And on the judgment day, that word will stick in your heart and will condemn you or will acquit you." And many of us of course, during these nineteen years, have found that the word of the preacher and the sound of the man's voice faded, and we have sensed God's own Spirit, speaking to our own hearts and speaking his words personally to us.

So loved ones, that's why we study this book above all books, and that's why we're doing it this way on Sunday mornings. And that's how we come nineteen years later to Romans 15:4. "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." So God is saying, the reason I have gone to all the trouble to preserve this book down through the years for you to read, is because what was written back here, 2000-3000 years ago, was written for your instruction, that by steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures, you might have hope. You need to receive that, you do. You need to receive that for yourself personally today. You need to receive that as God speaking to you and saying, whatever was written in former days, was written so that you this morning could receive instruction from me the Creator of the world. That's it.

Now there is a particular piece that was written, that God has laid on my heart that he wants to bring home to some of you this morning and I can show you it. It's 2 Timothy, 2:13, "If we are faithless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself." If we are faithless he remains faithful. That's it. So, the Creator is saying, "Even if you are faithless, I am faithful." Now, it won't always be so, in that sense. There will be a judgment day loved ones, there will, there will be a day of reckoning for faithless people.

You can see it talked about very clearly in Revelation, it's almost the last page of the Bible, if you just turn right back to almost the end of the Bible and you turn to Revelation 21. It's plainly spoken of. Revelation 21:7, "He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death." So, there will be a judgment day, when those of us who are faithless will render account for every careless word we utter, and we will spend our eternity, in something like Jean-Paul Sartre's, "No Exit" play. It'll be something where we will burn continually in our own lust and our own hopelessness forever, and where we will irritate each other to death and destroy each other continuously. So, there will be a judgment day, for those of us who continuously refuse God's offer to forgive us. There will be a judgment day. But these days are saving days. These days in which we live are saving days.

God has given you 70 or 80 years here on earth, in which to come through into faithfulness -- and throughout these saving days, it is true, even when you are faithless, he will still be faithful. And throughout these years here on earth, he is giving us a respite or a probationary time in which to enter into a real relationship of trust with him and that continues until the day of our death. And then the Bible says, then comes death and then comes the judgment. So all the grace ceases, at the moment of death, but until then, these are saving days and God's word to all of us this morning

is, even when you are faithless, I am still faithful.

Now is that really true? Is God really like that? Well, have you ever lied, have you ever lied to get yourself out of an awkward situation that you got into? Have you ever told a lie just to get round an awkward embarrassing kind of thing that you are involved in? Or you get into a circumstance that just looks black, and by one lie you can get out of it. Have you ever lied? Have you ever lied to make yourself look a little better in somebody else's eyes, just so that you'd appear better? Well, there was a man that did that. I'll show you the story, it's Genesis 12:10.

"Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, 'I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife"; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.' When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels."

And yet despite that lie, God was faithful. Look at verse 17, "But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had."

So even though Abraham was faithless, God was faithful and actually protected him and delivered him from the situation. And obviously Abraham was quite as faithful as you have always been and he learned his lesson and he never dreamed of doing the same thing again, at least not for a few years. Look at Genesis 20. Of course I know you are much brighter than Abraham and it has to be a very different situation for you that can be as boringly the same as his, but Genesis 20:1 "From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister.' And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, 'Behold, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife.' Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, 'Lord, wilt thou slay an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, "She is my sister"? And she herself said, "He is my brother." In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.' Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me; therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours.'"

And even though Abraham lied virtually the same lie years later, even though he was faithless, God remained faithful and delivered him. Why? And I'll show you, loved ones. It's back in 2 Timothy chapter one that we were reading. And it will give you the context if we read from verse 8. 2 Timothy 1:8. "Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel and the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ

Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearance of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

Now, do you see that phrase, "The grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus, ages ago"? The thing inside you that makes you lie, the thing inside you that makes you feel -- I have got to control this thing, it's getting out of hand and I have to somehow make my way around this, if I let go of this, I'll lose everything. I have to lie if necessary, to get out of this difficult situation, to preserve myself, I have to lie. The thing inside you that makes you do that, that carnal nature, that heart of sin, God destroyed in Jesus ages ago. It was destroyed in the lamb that was slain from before the foundation of the world.

God has already destroyed the thing in you that makes you lie. And so when you lie, what do you think his attitude is? His attitude certainly isn't to come down and crunch you, because he has already destroyed the thing in you that makes you lie. Christ bore your sin before the foundation of the world, before you were ever created. How? Because God is able to see everything in one great eternal moment, so to him, there is no such thing as time. So he has already destroyed the enemy within that makes you lie. So, when you lie, do you know what his one attitude is? His one attitude is a desire that you will realize and see that he has already destroyed the fear inside you that makes you lie. He has destroyed the self inside you that wants to preserve itself. He has destroyed that. The moment he can get you to see that is the moment all the reality of that will come into you and free you from lying.

That's all he is doing throughout these 70 or 80 years of respite. Every time you're acting as a person who has not been changed by God, he is doing everything he can to get you to see that you have been changed and to believe it and to begin to live in the light of it. And that's his only concern. He is not concerned to crunch you, there is no point in crunching you -- you've been crunched once, no point in crunching you twice. So he has no antagonism; that's why the Bible says even if we are faithless, he remains faithful and he will continue to do that until the moment of your death. And then, if you have continued to believe the lie that you've not been changed in Jesus or to refuse to receive that change then another principle begins to operate in your life after death. It is unto you according to your faith. Then you actually receive the effects of that lie permanently into your character and you live in the midst of deception and frustration and death forever.

But loved ones, in this present life, God is pleading with you to see, that even if you are faithless he is still faithful. And he is still dealing graciously with you and his only interest is in getting you to see that it all has been fixed in Jesus. And he wants you to believe that and to begin to live in open fellowship with him. The job of our archenemy, Satan, is to persuade you that you are nothing but a hopeless liar. You have lied and you have made resolutions not to lie. You have lied and you have determined not to lie again. You have lied again and now what can you do but just live in the midst of a lying life. And God says, "No, even if you have been faithless to me, a thousand times I am still faithful and I love you and I want you to believe that I've changed everything in my Son, come on, let's put our arms around each other and let's begin to live free from lying and free from the sins that have constantly tripped us up."

The only thing that can steal heaven from you, the only thing that can steal victory from you, is your believing that you are in a hopeless, helpless situation and that nobody can change you. The moment you see that God has already changed you, and rise up and begin to live above that, you're continuing on the way to the salvation that will deliver you completely from yourself.

So I am thinking of anybody here this morning, who either has been caught in chronic lying and is just worn out with it or anybody here this morning who has been caught in some lust or in some habit that they've almost given up on. I am saying to you, our God says, even though you are faithless I am still faithful and I still have nothing but love for you and nothing but a desire that you'll come alongside me and see what I've done for you, in Jesus. So here's what I suggest -- because I think it continues to darken your steps, I think you keep on looking at yourself as a second class citizen, I think you keep on -- you have the seeds of destruction within your own attitude to yourself because you keep on saying to yourself, I've tried this a thousand times and I've never made it.

So loved ones, I encourage you. We'll just sing that hymn that we all know so well, just that hymn of dedication and if you're in that situation and you believe what God's word says, that even though you have been faithless a thousand times, he is still faithful and he is still willing to deal with you. And I would encourage you to come to the altar, just make a new commitment of yourself to God, and receive again his forgiveness and determine to walk free of it this coming week, and to walk in the changed person that God has wrought in Calvary. We'll just sing the hymn straight through once, so I encourage you just to do it, and then if you want to return to your seat that's good or if you want to stay there and I'll be glad to pray with you or counsel with you afterwards. But I'd encourage you to do it. The big thing is, step out of it, even though you are faithless, he is still faithful. That's his own word on it.