

Purpose of the Law

Romans 5:20b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Really it isn't very difficult to believe that the capacities that we have are purely temporal. I think you will agree with that. The physical and the mental abilities that we have this morning are not going to last forever. If you were to look at LBJ or at Harry Truman or at a relative as they lie in a casket, it's very easy to believe that the abilities that we have ourselves are going to end up like that also, and that they just are not going to last forever.

Yet the strange paradox is, that there is probably not one of us here in the theater this morning who doesn't feel that we ought to last forever. Isn't that true? It doesn't matter how cool or how cynical you are about life, the idea seems somehow ridiculous that this complicated personality that we have and this intricate world in which we live is all going to end after 70 or 80 years. The idea seems illogical, doesn't it? That's the strange thing about us. The abilities we have seem to be purely temporal and yet there is something inside us that makes us feel we ought to live forever. We are made to live forever.

You remember Kant, the philosopher said. "The sight of the starry skies above and the experience of conscience within me yearning for something higher convinces every man that there must be some kind of life after physical death." When you think of the accounts of civilizations that most of us have studied through the years, you remember that there isn't a civilization on the globe that has not had literature connected with this kind of thing. Every one of them has had literature or stories about someone who was trying to get some substance that would enable them to live forever. And almost every civilization, almost every literature, witnesses to that fact that men feel they ought to live forever.

Ponce de Leon you remember discovered the island of Puerto Rico. When he discovered it, he was not looking for a paradise island. He was out looking for that elixir of life that would rejuvenate him and keep him continually young. And if you remember the stories in classical mythology, every mythology that you read, whatever nation it's connected with, has a hero of some kind who spent years and years searching for the fountain of eternal youth. It does seem that we men and women have always had the feeling that there is something more than what we have. There is something better in life than what we possess at this moment.

You know that what we have discovered in our studies of the presentation of the creator of the world that we get through Jesus, that in these studies we have begun to see that all this wishful thinking and this desperate yearning has really a basis in reality. That in fact, God did give us these physical and mental temporal abilities but he also gave us another kind of power or substance that actually goes beyond the temporal and that actually does last forever. Do you see brother and sisters that it's because that is reality that we have so many corrupted versions of the search for that reality in the mythological looking and investigating after an elixir of life?

We men and women do not normally go off on some fairy tale unless there is some basis and reality for the kind of search that we are engaging upon. That search is found back in Genesis if you like to look at it -- Genesis 2: 7-9. And really all these ancient stories that we so often smile at and

even the sublimation of these stories in our present desperate attempts in medicine (because medicine in our day has now taken over the function that those mythological stories performed in ancient times) is now engaged in trying to prolong at all costs the functions of the body for as long as men want.

That's why we are involved in transplants of all kinds. We are now in medicine after the same thing. They are trying to satisfy the desire that all of us have that we should live beyond the 70 or 80 year period. You get the basis of all that search in Genesis 2:7-9. "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." The Hebrew word is "nephesh", "soul" you remember. And that refers to the physical -- you see the dust. The soul is the Greek word "pseuche" (the Hebrew word is "nephesh") and that really means the psychological part of us.

And so God gave us a physical and a psychological part, both of which were temporal. And then in verse 9 you see he made another kind of life available.

"And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden."

That tree had the quality that is described there in Genesis 3:22. Genesis 3:22 describes the quality of that tree of life. "Then the LORD God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.'"

And the quality of that second kind of life that God made available is that it enables us to live forever. That's one of the things it does. And really you see that the Creator of the universe gave us this physical and mental life that is purely temporal. But he also made available another supernatural life force that would transform these abilities that we have and would enable them to actually go on forever. And that's why so many of us have this yearning. And it is reasonable dear ones, that's the way we were made. We were made to sense that we were more than just temporal creatures.

Now God of course, makes a complete distinction between those two kinds of lives. He makes that an absolute dichotomy between the temporal kind of life that he provided and the supernatural kind of life that he provided. In fact so strong does he make that dichotomy that he calls one "life" and the other he calls "death". And he says that's the choice that you people have actually before you. You can make do with this temporal life that is actually in my mind only death and will be death for you after 70 years, or you can begin to receive this life that is life indeed, that enables you to live like me forever.

Now, you find that choice presented clearly in Deuteronomy 30:19 right near the beginning of the Bible. And you see there the clear statement of our Creator to us, in Deuteronomy 30:19. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live."

And that was really the choice that the Creator has set before us. Now, choosing life, that supernatural life force that he provided, did mean exerting dependent loving intercourse with our Creator. You see that in the next verse there in verse 20; "loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

So receiving that supernatural life does mean a loving dependence on the Creator. Now, it was that very thing that the creator of evil laid emphasis on when he persuaded us to make do with the physical and mental life that we have. It was that desire for independence that seems to be inside us, that the creator of evil emphasized when he persuaded us to make do with just the physical and temporal and mental life that we possess.

And so, what happened was, most of us believe that we have all the life we need, when in fact we have only this temporal, physical and mental life. We were persuaded of that because we thought it was sufficient for us at the time and would be sufficient forever. And you can get that kind of approach by really the great deceiver in Genesis 3:4. There is no point in just looking back to this purely as a historical event. It is that. But the fact is, this deceiver is still involved with most of us today, and is still urging the same thing.

Genesis 3:4; "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die.'" And really that has been his approach to us all through the years. This physical and mental life is all you need; it's enough for you. It's keeping you alive today, that's all you need. You don't need any more than that.

And brothers and sisters, that's the problem with most of us. We really do think that what we've got is all we need. That's it. That's really what sin is; sin is not just wanting to be independent of the Creator of the galaxies and the Creator of the rivers and the mountains -- sin is also a real deception. It's a real deception that we have all the life that we need. That's really the problem with many of us in the theater this morning. It's really not that we don't believe a lot of the right things. But many of us here are absolutely convinced that we have all the life that we need this morning. There is nothing deeper than the physical and mental life that we possess this moment. That talk about spiritual life is just -- mythology.

And many of us are utterly convinced that the life we have now is the only life we need. We are really a bit like somebody going into the garage, turning on the engine, and sitting there with the window open. You can't smell the carbon monoxide. You can't sense it coming in but it's filling the car, and you are becoming fainter and fainter, wearier and wearier. And you don't know but it (death) just comes like that. It's a bit like that. We are involved in breathing in the kind of life that we don't know is death and that is in fact bringing us gradually to death. But we don't know it, and we are walking around thinking we have it. This applies even to those of us who know the rest of the story.

There are many of us here this morning who know that God, when he was faced with a bunch of rebels like ourselves refusing his supernatural life force, we know that he determined there and then to destroy us lest we destroy his universe forever. And we know that at that moment his son agreed to face that death penalty of destruction on our behalf. And for that reason God has made available his supernatural life force of the Holy Spirit to us again.

But there are many of us who believe all that and yet still have not received that life. Loved ones, do you see it is possible to believe all the right things and yet still not to be receiving that supernatural life force of the Holy Spirit that enables you to be an eternal supernatural being. That is possible. The tragedy is, that many of us who have great pride in our intellects are absolutely convinced that if we believe all that about Jesus dying for our sins, and we believe that God is willing to forgive us then we must have received this life. No, loved ones, no. It is possible to believe it all and yet not to receive that life.

And so it is vital to see that that's why God set forth the verse that we are studying today. And that's why he did what this verse says. Maybe you would look at it in Romans 5:20. "Law came in, to increase the trespass." Now that's why God made laws of life. It was as if many of us were living without the right vitamins. And you know many of us do that. We live and eat the old greasy food (I better not use any trade names), and fill up the cholesterol. We aren't eating the right food at all.

It's as if God was looking at many of us not eating the right vitamins. He comes down and says, "Look, the only way to persuade you people that you are not eating the right vitamins is to tell you here are some of the laws of life. If you are eating the right vitamins, you will have 20-20 vision. If you are eating the right vitamins, your pulse beat and your heart beat will be such and such. And if you are eating the right vitamins this kind of thing will happen." And that's why God made the laws of life.

He said "Listen. Many of you believe the right things about me but you still haven't received my supernatural life force of the Holy Spirit. Now look, if you receive this life force, these are the actions and the words that this life force produces in your life. Would you look at these laws of life and see if they describe the kind of life that you live. If they do, then you probably are receiving my supernatural life force. If you are not, then you are not receiving the life force."

And that's why law came in. It came to increase the sin in that sense -- to let us know that we were sinning. In other words, sin is independence of God. It's not depending on God. And as a result of not depending on him, you don't receive the supernatural life force that he can give you through the Holy Spirit. You go on believing that you have it even though you haven't and that is sin. Now, God said, I want to show you that you are living in the midst of sin. I want to increase your sense of sin by showing you the kind of life that people live who have this life force. Now, that's why law came in. Law came in to increase the sin. It was to make our independence of God more obvious to us so that we actually realize what it was.

Now, brothers and sisters, do you see what our attitude would be to one another if we did that in regard to leukemia? Let's say some of us here had leukemia this morning, and we just wouldn't believe it. We didn't know that we had leukemia, we wouldn't seek any cure and we wouldn't seek any treatment. We just said, "No, I am okay."

Then others of us find a book that outlines the symptoms of leukemia. It says, "If you have leukemia you will have this and you will have this." Now, brothers and sisters, can you sense our attitude to one another in that situation? Do you see that it wouldn't be one of condemnation? Don't you see that? It wouldn't be me going to John or Connie and saying, "Look, you have got leukemia and I am condemning you. You shouldn't be here at all. You just don't fit in with these symptoms of healthy life."

Do you see there would be no place for condemnation? Don't you see that we would be loving towards each other? We would be doing our best and praying for the other person that they would see their true state and they would see that they really have leukemia, so that they would seek a cure and get some kind of life into their bodies that would drive out the disease. Do you see that would be our attitude? There would be no attitude of using the laws of healthy life to condemn other people, make them feel uncomfortable or inferior. Rather, there would be an attitude of love towards each other that urged each other to see our true state.

Now brothers and sisters, do you see that that's the attitude God wants us to take to the law? He wants us to use the law as a diagnostic tool to see our true state. God's law says, "Thou shalt not covet." You know fine well that you're coveting that sheepskin coat -- or you're coveting the Duster -- or you're coveting the Triumph 600 [a car]. Your mind is set on that, running round-and-round as to how you will get another \$50 to buy that thing. Let's not get all academic about coveting. It's when your mind is on the thing again and again every time you have any leisure.

Now if you find yourself coveting, what you ought to do is look in and say, "Now, is my attitude to possessions the attitude of Jesus?" The spirit of Jesus sits very loosely by possessions because he is aware that all the possessions of the world belong to his Father, and his Father can give them to him at any time that he thinks he needs it. Now, is my attitude to possessions, the attitude of the spirit of Jesus? Or, am I in fact grasping at these things because I feel I have to get them because I'm not sure whether God knows I need them and I'm not sure whether he could get them for me?

Brothers and sisters, the approach should be, look in and see: is my attitude to possessions the attitude of the supernatural spirit of Jesus -- or the supernatural life force that God gives me? And if it isn't, then that life force is not working in me -- at least in regard to my possessions; and possibly not working in me at all. But certainly it's not working in me in that regard.

Do you see, that -- that's the attitude, loved ones. The attitude is not, "Oh well, I don't have a pale face, I don't have the symptoms of leukemia, no I don't -- I don't have those symptoms." That's a silly attitude where you pretend, "No, I don't covet. I may just be a little interested in that motorbike but I don't really covet." No, be sensible. The law came in to increase the sin -- to make it obvious where you stood.

That's the beautiful thing about Christianity. You don't need to be in doubt. You don't need to say, "I think I'm a Christian or I'm not sure I'm a Christian. Sometimes I am, sometimes I'm not. Now I was feeling pretty good yesterday, but don't feel so good today." It just is not that kind of deal, you see? It's not that kind of deal. It's not, I'm a Christian because I don't wear cut-off's at summer camp. Or I'm a Christian because I don't go to the theater. It's not that kind of deal. It's a straight, plain system. The life of the Holy Spirit is described in the laws of life. God says if you're filled with the life of my Holy Spirit, then you'll have no other gods before me. You won't take my name in vain. You won't covet. You won't commit adultery. These are promises -- these are things that will automatically happen if my life force is running through you.

And so, our attitude should be: "Is this life force in me?" Let's say you come to the business of envy. The Bible says that envy is obviously a work of the flesh and is not God's will for us. Then what you ought to do is look inside and say, "Is my attitude to my friends and to others, the attitude of Jesus of Nazareth? Do I want the best for them? Do I want them to be better than me? What is my attitude to their achievements? What is my attitude to their successes or to their failures? Am I willing to be nothing compared with my friends? Am I willing to be what Jesus was, a complete failure, so that my friends really should succeed?"

Ask yourself loved ones; is the Spirit of Jesus moving within you? Because here's the fact: if that spirit is moving within you, you won't envy. The thing is not to say, "I do envy, I do envy, so I mustn't envy, I must stop envying. I am not going to envy today, no envy today." No, that's silly because you're trying to persuade yourself, God and everybody else that you have this life force within you when obviously, the symptoms of your own life show that you haven't.

It's the same with all those sins that you can think of. It doesn't matter which one you take -- coveting, envy, ambition, or greed -- don't look at them as something that you try to avoid. Look at them as symptoms of purely temporal life within you. See that if they're there, you're going to die anyway after 70 years. And what you need to do is to get down to receiving this life force that God has.

Now I think this is utterly opposite to the attitude that the law causes in many people. In many people, the law increases sin in a different way. Many people look at the laws and they say, "Well, I don't have those things in my life -- but I can be that if I want to on my own without God's help. And I'm going to be that." And they begin to be self righteous. That's the only thing worse than pretending that you haven't leukemia. That's the only thing worse than avoiding the fact that you have leukemia -- putting cosmetics in your face and trying to make yourself look healthy and pretending that you're deliberately healthy when you're not.

That's what many of us do with the law. That's why Christianity for many of us becomes a terrible burden. It becomes a great sack that we carry on our backs where we try to obey all the laws to prove to ourselves, to God and to our friends that we're Christians. Don't you see it's getting it backwards? You don't tackle the law like that. You tackle the law as laws of life and laws of death. If I commit adultery, if I lust, if I envy, if I covet, then there's some of temporal life running through me that I need to exchange for God's life.

Every time that independence and rebellion threshes inside you, remember that God is more gracious than all your independence and your rebellion. God will always be willing to give you that life force but it is vital for you to ask. That's really what today's verse is about, if you look at it.

Romans 5:20; "Law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." The Father above us and the Father around about us and within us today is willing to give you the life of the Holy Spirit if you will admit that you do not have him and that you need him. But the law is here to undeceive us. It's not to get us to try to pretend that we're alive when we're not.

And do you see what our attitude should be towards one another? I can't stand up here and condemn you and say, "Oh, you have envy, or you're jealous, you're worse than me." That isn't the attitude we take. If we really love each other, we'll be saying to each other and praying for each other, "Look, that's temporal life that you have within you. It's going to go out after 70 years. You need to receive the eternal supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. Now, don't you see that you need it?" And it's that kind of attitude we take to each other. But, the thing is not to talk to each other even like that. We should have that attitude to each other, but we should not preach to each other. We should live healthy lives so that anybody who's sick can see they're sick and can begin to seek that life and heal us.

So brothers and sisters, do you see that the law is a friend, a dear friend to us? The laws of life that God has given us are good and are to be loved by us. Let us pray.

We thank you Father for listing the symptoms for us so clearly and showing us that the answer is to go to you, a loving Father, gracious beyond anything that we could imagine and to ask you again for that life and to receive the life of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

