

Death of Sin and Life of Grace

Romans 5:21

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Would you take a Bible, dear ones, and look at Romans 5:21. And you can see it's the last verse of the chapter and it summarizes the first section of one of the most important presentations of reality that we have in our world. That's what you have to call Romans -- and 5:21 summarizes it. "So that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Really -- it speaks of two forces at work: a force of life, and a force of death. And the force of death always works where people live as if there's no God; and the force of life always works where people live as if God is the Father of Jesus.

And so, what Paul is really saying is, "Wherever you find death, there has also been right alongside it, the power of life." And you find that right from the beginning of the world. Wherever men have lived by their own wits, according to their own ideas of knowledge, there has always been death working. Wherever people have really believed there was an infinite wise Creator, and lived by his guidance, there has always been life.

In 1552 in Egypt, which is about 3500 years ago, there was a book that was the epitome of medical knowledge at that time. Egypt of course, was leading every other civilization in medicine. The book was called "The Papyrus Ebers", and that book has some recommendations for people who are losing hair. And this is the height of mental wisdom that men can produce on their own at that time. When hair falls out, one remedy is to apply a mixture of six fats; namely those of the horse, the hippopotamus, the crocodile, the cat, the snake, and the ibex. To strengthen it, anoint with the tooth of a donkey, crushed in honey. Now that's as high as medicine at that time could take you.

And for embedded splinters, they applied worm's blood and ass's dung. Since dung is loaded with tetanus spores, McMillan says, "It is little wonder that Lock Jaw took a heavy toll on splinter cases."

Now at the same time, as men were living independent of God by their own wits, (and therefore obviously spreading death), there was a man called Moses in the wilderness desert of Sinai. He was not in the colleges and schools of Egypt, but in a wilderness desert with a little group of nomads following him. And because he was trusting in the Creator he was given by inspiration a different kind of wisdom. So at the time when that ridiculous kind of witch doctor nonsense was being practiced and was bringing death, Moses was writing things like this found in Numbers 19:14-15. You'll see that he was in fact outlining some of the best laws of hygiene that have ever been devised.

Numbers 19:14-16 "This is the law when a man dies in a tent: every one who comes into the tent, and every one who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days. And every open vessel, which has no cover fastened upon it, is unclean."

And then, he goes on down to 18 and 19. "Then a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the

water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon all the furnishings, and upon the persons who were there, and upon him who touched the bone, or the slain, or the dead, or the grave; and the clean person shall sprinkle upon the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; thus on the seventh day he shall cleanse him, and he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and at evening he shall be clean.”

The amazing thing is that it was these laws of hygiene that were discovered in the 19th century, and were used to put at last an end to the terrible infections and plagues that destroyed people’s lives in the hospitals in Europe. It was eventually a return to the sprinkling of water that at last put an end to those plagues and infections.

So at the same time, brothers and sisters, as men by their own wits, were producing this death that we read about in "Papyrus Ebers" in Egypt, this man was producing, by divine revelation and inspiration, laws of hygiene which were not accepted by us until 3300 years later. In fact, there were many doctors who lost their jobs because they were trying to bring this kind of practice in the hospitals.

The New York Department of Health as usual, was a little behind everybody else. In 1960 they issued a handbook after 86 of their patients had died in one of the hospitals on the East Coast. They issued a handbook outlining carefully the method to be used in washing hands. It’s almost exactly a copy of the method that Moses detailed in Numbers 3400 years earlier.

Now, that’s what I mean when I say, wherever there has been this death that has come from living as if there was no God, there has always been a stream of life in our world that has come because people were prepared to believe that there was a God and to trust him. You see, it’s the same in our own personal lives, in our national lives, our international lives and our economic lives. There are two forces at work. There’s a force of death at work when we live as if there’s no God and there’s a force of life that begins to be released into our lives when we live as if there really is a God whom we can trust. And those forces are always coming against one another.

Sin is really independence of God. It’s rejecting the idea that there is a Creator at all. And what Romans 5:21 is saying is, wherever you live as if there’s no God, sin reigns in death. It sets forth a death that is not only mental and emotional, but it actually becomes physical. But wherever people live in dependence upon God, there is released God’s generous power of life. That’s what it means by saying, "his grace." His grace is released to anyone who receives his righteousness. That is, to anyone who allows God to make him right with themselves, through trusting in Jesus’ death for them. To them, there is released the power of life. And that’s really what Paul is saying throughout the first five chapters.

You know it is very sophisticated today to say, "Well Brother, I would believe in God and I would trust him and live that way if I really had enough data to decide that there was a God. But frankly, I haven’t enough information. And that’s why I live as an agnostic. I’m just not sure that there is a Creator to trust." And you may say, "I’m experiencing death in my own life, but I’m experiencing it through ignorance -- not through determined rebellion against this God."

Now, brothers and sisters, Paul called that a cop out at the beginning of the letter to the Romans. He said, "That isn’t true." He said, "The idea of God is an innate primary truth that most of us are born with." It’s reinforced every time we read ancient history. Every time we look at the universe and see its order and design, it is borne in upon us that there must be a God. And when we read of

Jesus and of his resurrection from the dead, we become convinced that there must be a Creator. And Paul says, "A person who doesn't believe in God is one who has chosen not to believe in God."

You remember he puts that in Romans 1:19 if you'd like to look at it. Because I think a lot of us like to pretend in a sophisticated way that if we have the information, we would then be prepared to believe in God. But really, Paul says, "No, you have the information if you look at it."

It's Romans 1:19, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

I honestly think brothers and sisters that most of us are a bit like Aldous Huxley. We have enough information to begin to treat God as if he's really there. But we have a vested interest in living our own lives as we want to. We have a vested interest in believing that there is no God. We want to live our lives not under someone else's authority, but under our own authority.

The kind of death we first experience therefore is the death of mindlessness. That's the first kind of death that sin begins to reign in, in people who reject the idea of God. It's mindlessness because you have to be educated to reject the idea of God. It is so obvious, the idea of God -- it is so plain and obvious. It is so obvious that there must be a being who created all this and who made us like ourselves. You almost have to be perverted intellectually to reject it and that's what happens. We reject the obvious, and our minds become mindless. That's what Paul is saying when he wrote the next verse.

In verse 21, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God, or give thanks to him; but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened." That's really the first kind of death that hits you when you refuse to treat God as being a real person. Your mind becomes really confused and illogical. "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles."

And we say to ourselves, "No, we couldn't become as ridiculous as that." Until you look at our society and you see how we are prepared to kill and divorce and murder in order to get another car, or in order to get another piece of clothing, or another house. Brothers and sisters, when we look at our society, we see a society that is experiencing the death of mindlessness. We let the murderers out a couple of days after we've arrested them and then we hold up our hands in horror because we have such a violent society.

Or, we fill the mass media with a pre-occupation with sex and then we are surprised that Venereal Disease is on the increase in our society. It's a kind of mindlessness, isn't it? We do what would produce the result and then we stand back horrified. It's utterly illogical and we are surprised that the result comes about. It's the same in our schools. From high school right on up, we regard the school as a kind of soft, easy place where we divert the children. And so, we've softened the whole emotional and intellectual discipline in our high schools, in our colleges, and then we're amazed that our adults seem to be judging things so poorly when they grow up. There's a kind of mindlessness that runs through us.

The energy crisis is another example. We know fine well, that there's plenty of oil to be received

and we don't want to hold the prices up there. But we hold the prices up, and we'll even cause deaths in hospitals and cause deaths in homes in order to get that greed satisfied. So the first kind of death that begins to spread among people who live as if there's no God is a certain illogicality that begins to run their lives. And you can see that death present in our societies.

Now, don't sit there and say, "Brother, you mean I'm being illogical and I'm being illogical on the rest of my life because I don't trust God?" No. But if you look at society, you'll see that that's where it eventually leads you. You have to be illogical to reject the idea of God. That illogicality continues to spread in your life, and will eventually express itself in your life if it hasn't already. So first of all, sin reigns in the mindlessness of death.

I think there is another problem. When we refuse to acknowledge God as the Creator of the world, he is put in an impossible position Himself. He is the supreme ruler of the universe. And here are we, little flies, and we say, "We don't believe in You." Well, God has obligated Himself to accept that rejection and say, "Well, I can't force you, but I have to reject you also." And so, that's really what happens. We reject our Creator, and so, he gives us up. And that's what Paul says, "So God gives us up."

That results in that terrible sense of vacuum that many of us experience. That's the reason why many of us experience the loneliness of death in our lives today. We reject God and he gives us up. Then suddenly we feel we have nobody that cares. We suddenly begin to wonder why we're here at all. We wonder what place we have here and who put us here, because we've rejected the one significant other who did put us here. And so, we're left in an absolute vacuum. Many of us live from day to day in that vacuum. We're strangers among a mass of strangers. We're people who don't know who we are, or why we are. We're people who can't find a reason to justify our own existence. And through that comes a great sense of the death of separation and alienation.

And you know it loved ones; many of our roommates here are experiencing that terrible loneliness. What is the question that we're asking in all our seminars in school? The whole question is, "Who are we?" When I first heard that question, I thought, "Who are you? Well, check your passport and you'll know." It seemed such a strange question when it first became popular. But that's the popular question. A deep answer for a Ph.D. candidate as to why he's doing his degree is, "I'm trying to find who I am." And you feel that if he doesn't know who he is he's in real trouble, starting out in the doctorate. Yet, that's the point we've come to. And part of your slowness to laugh at the thing at first, is that we've all been brainwashed into it, isn't it? We've been taught to believe, "That sounds a very intellectual, deep question for a logical person to ask." But it's really only a question that is asked by a person who doesn't believe there's a Creator; who doesn't believe there's any purpose in the world. Then he's left in that absolute vacuum and he enters into the death of separation and alienation.

And you don't have to read many of our playwrights to see that that is the disease that is spreading through our world -- a terrible sense of loneliness. It's a terrible sense that nobody cares for me. It's a terrible feeling that there's no reason for me being here, that there's no point in me being here at all. And there is no point apart from a Creator. So, when you reject the Creator, there is no reason for being here.

And you know what that results in. You find yourself in a very vulnerable position. You find yourself -- one little fly, of three and a half billion flies, on one of billions of spheres, that are whirling through billions of square miles of space. Now that's a pretty insecure position to be

in. And it's not long before you begin to feel it's an insecure position. And you begin to feel, if I'm to retain my sanity, I must find a reason for being here. I must prove to myself and to everybody else, that there's some reason for me being here. I must justify my own existence in some way. And you know what results. We enter into that miserable rat race where we feel we have total responsibility for our marital and career status. It's a massive responsibility that we were never made to bear. But we begin to take that as our responsibility and the result is that we begin to worry. We worry, and the glands in the stomach that create acid, create excess acid. The acid produce ulcers and the death becomes a physical death.

Or we determine we must prove that there is a reason for us being here; we must justify our existence, and we enter into that terrible competitive academic or professional world. We try to beat other people to it. We try to hold other people down. We begin to resent other people who seem to be doing better than we are at proving that they have a right to be here. And the resentment grows up within us into bitterness. The bitterness begins to produce effects on the blood supply to our brains. It begins to produce effects in our muscles and we begin to end up with colitis and heart attacks. And death again becomes physical.

Now brothers and sisters, that's something of what it means when Paul says, "Sin reigns in death." Living as if there's no God eventually results in death. There is death in a sense of mindlessness with an illogicality and intellectual confusion. Then there is sin, in the sense of an alienation from all the other people in the world and with it a sense of terrible loneliness. And then comes death, (in the sense of real physical death) as our bodies begin to deteriorate and to break down under the strain of the psychosomatic diseases.

And loved ones, here's what Paul is saying. In the midst of all that, there is a stream of people who do believe that there is a Creator and who live as if that Creator is really alive. There are a number of us who have accepted the conclusions of our common sense; and who have accepted the conclusions of history. We've accepted the conclusions that we have come to from studying the life of Jesus in the first century. And we do really believe that there is a Creator, who is what Jesus said: the Father of Jesus Christ. He is loving like Jesus and is kindly like him and we've begun to live as if that Creator is really alive. As a result, our minds have come into some grasp of logic and some kind of control of themselves.

And so, you begin to see that the business of letting murderers out two days after being arrested, is not kindness to the criminal. That's not what law is all about. Law is not concerned with being kind to the person who has done wrong. Law is concerned with upholding God's sense of justice and holiness by exercising a justice itself. And we begin to see that our schools are not there to be a diversion for our kids. They are not there to be a method of getting better paying jobs. They are there to help us to understand God's plans for bringing the world and the universe under his control.

And we begin to see sex not as a substitute for the exhilaration that the Holy Spirit alone can bring, but we begin to see it as part of what is a real married relationship. The mind begins to come into order as we begin to live on the understanding that there is a God who really does love us and care for us.

Maybe one of the greatest signs of life is the change it brings in our attitude to ourselves. It's so good to feel that the Creator of the universe really knows you. It is really exciting to know that He knows my name and that He has numbered the hairs of my head. And suddenly, I don't care what

you all think of me. I don't care what the professor thinks of me or what somebody else thinks of me. My Creator knows me -- I'm his son and he's my Father. I can trust him. What does it matter what the ratings say? What does it matter whether I am up or down? If my Father thinks the world of me, he's the only one that counts in the universe.

It's hard for even [President] Nixon to have more power than him. And so, there comes a great relaxation in my relationships. I no longer feel I have to beat all of you down in order to prove myself to myself. I no longer feel I have to scramble to the top of the heap in order to justify my existence. I no longer feel I have to be the best in the world, or I have to be like Muhammad Ali, the greatest. I no longer feel that pressure. I feel, "Father, you know why I'm here, you know what I'm here for. I thank you. You think the world of me, and so I don't care what the others think. I'm going to do what you've put me here to do."

So there comes a great sense of peace, dear ones. There comes a great sense of peace in your body as a result of that; because you're no longer straining. If somebody does something against you, you don't feel the need to bear resentment against them. No, you say, "Father, you saw what he did, but you are in control of my life; you are in control of my failures; you're in control of me losing my job even; you're in control of my failures in examinations. You can work all those into your plan for me, so I don't need to resent them or worry about them or be concerned about them. Father, I thank you that you're in control."

And loved ones, there begins to come a great relaxation into your body. No longer do you toss at night worrying about what's going to happen the next day. Why? Because your Father knows it and he has already made plans about it. You no longer worry, "Am I going to get married next year? Will I ever get married?" The Father knows he has a plan for you. And you know he's going to work everything according to the counsel of his will. And even when it seems certain that somebody has upset that beautiful plan, it's good to be able to look up and say, "Father, to me it seems the whole thing has fallen apart, but you know exactly where I'm going. And I know you're going to work this into the plan."

And so, brothers and sisters, there comes a real peace; a real freedom from worry, a real freedom from strain, resentment and bitterness. The body begins to work better and you begin to find life taking back the death that has begun to spread in your body. Your body begins to experience that life. And eventually, God had promised that life will overcome death. Death itself actually will be lived through by us because of this power of life within us.

Now that's really what Paul is saying. There are two forces at work today. There is a force of death at work in those who live as if there's no God. This is an utterly illogical and insane position to undertake and no human being is made to bear the strain and the pressure that that brings. And then there is a force of life that is released by the Creator, if you are prepared to live as if he is really there and to begin to treat him as a dear Father that really does love you.

Now, we'll see, in the coming months and years -- from chapter six on, what this life does inside us when it comes to us. But I think what Paul wants to get home to us now, in these first five chapters is, that there are two ways to live; and you have to choose which.

I suppose, because I really do love you, I'd ask you -- it's hard to speak to you personally except that God can make you know that I am speaking to you -- would you really think, brothers and sisters, about it? Would you decide which way you're living? Don't be foolish. Don't live that life

of strain and stress.

Loved ones, there is a God. The arguments are too strong; the order and design of the universe, the existence of Jesus and the innate primary idea you have in your own mind that there's a God. The arguments are too strong. The question really is: "Will you let him be your God, or do you want to be your own God?" That's really the issue and it's one that brings tremendous strain. Because how can you as God guide your little ship among the other three and a half billion that are trying to guide their ships?

There's a dear Father, who knows where your ship ought to go. He knows exactly what your life was created for. He will bring a freedom from strain into that life if you'll begin to treat him seriously. So will you think about it? It really takes a decision. It's not something you waffle into or fall into by osmosis. You really do have to decide; "I've been living as if there's no God up to now, I'm going to start living as if God is my Heavenly Father and as if he is like Jesus and as if he did let Jesus die for me." And then you really take up an attitude towards it in your mind. Let's pray.

Dear Father, I would trust you for quiet wisdom and peace to think for each of us this morning. Father, I trust you for brothers and sisters among us who have brainwashed themselves for so long to believe that you do not exist. Father, I would trust you to show them that you respect them and you love them. Father, I would trust you to enable them to deal with their intellectual difficulties and the intellectual problems; and to deal with them honestly, and then to be prepared to put their life where their head is. And to be prepared to put their will where their mouth is; and to be prepared to submit to you if they do come to the conclusion that you are God.

Father, we would pray for each other here in the theater this morning. We all know the pressures we're under and the subtle forces that have worked within us. We would pray for each other this morning. We pray for clarity of thought, and also for a will that is willing to submit, to obey, to trust and love you. I trust you for these things Father; for the sake of my brothers and sisters and for your sake and your authority. Amen.