

## Death to the Selfish Will

Romans 6:6

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Would you turn to Romans 6:6? It was really the truth in this verse that the Spirit used to transform my life after I had been a Christian for 12 or 13 years.

Romans 6:6 – “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” For years I understood it intellectually but it wasn't real inside at all.

Have you ever received a newspaper from your hometown? I got one from Belfast, Northern Ireland just this last week. It really looks terribly provincial doesn't it when you read back and find out what they're arguing about. My newspaper was filled with the shootings and the bombings. There were several instances.

Last month the terrorists set a building on fire and one fireman called Morrison was trying to put it out to prevent it spreading to other houses. He was shot in the back by other terrorists while he was trying to put the fire out. In another situation, a policeman called Douglas went out into the middle of the road to try to lift a lady who had been hurt in a car accident and take her over to the ambulance. A terrorist shot him in the back four times, as he was lifting her off the pavement.

It's that kind of incident that makes you realize that man's inhumanity to man is almost beyond description. And you read of Lee Kessler, the prisoner of war, and the tortures he went through with the wire and the rope tortures. You remember the communist jailors beat him for three days solid. He had that broken leg, you remember, with gangrene setting in. And that kind of thing just seems unbelievable, doesn't it?

The thing is that kind of inhumanity of man to man that is making a lot of even humanist intellectuals begin to suspect that the power of evil in the world is really a hideous personal being of some kind. They were all very skeptical of that whole idea for a long time. But it seems it's the only way now to explain it. Or you look at the whole Watergate affair [American political scandal] and you see the deviousness of it, whoever you're supporting. The thing is full of lies and back room subterfuge of all kinds. You begin to feel that there's such lying and deceit in our world that there just has to be a supernatural being of some kind that is bringing it all about.

It just seems, brothers and sisters, that we men and women could not hate each other so much that we'd do these things to each other on our own. It's just hard to know what to make of it. And wherever you look it seems that as evil works itself out more and more in our world we seem to realize repeatedly that it's not just an absence of good in our world but it's a real positive presence of evil. I am sure you felt the same when you've seen things with absolute foolishness and hideousness like “Deep Throat” [a pornographic movie] and that getting even as far as it has in our world.

You begin to realize some of the most hideous things that go on in the world of the mafia, seem to be going on even in our own society. You begin to look at a case like the Charles Manson case, where ritual murder takes place and you think that kind of thing couldn't happen in a civilized country.

It seems, doesn't it, that evil is a positive power. It seems it's not just the absence of good or neighborliness. It seems that there's a positive, supernatural being of some kind that infuses into us intense, overwhelming hatred for each other. Certainly in your heart and mine, even when we're at our worst, it's hard to work up that kind of hatred, isn't it.

It really does seem, doesn't it, that independence of God, or sin, is an actual power in our world. Yet it's hard really to know how it started at all, isn't it? I mean the world was obviously good at the beginning. It was obviously planned in such a way that it would develop beautifully. You remember how God arranged it if you would like to look at Genesis 1:28. I know we've looked at the verse before but I think it's good to look back to how things were. They seem to have got into such a mess today.

Genesis 1:28 – “And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’” And obviously at the beginning it was really good. We all knew what we were here for. We were to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion. God presumably directed us as to what we should do. He gave us tasks and responsibilities. Therefore we had a sense that we were accepted by him. We had a feeling of approval when we did these things.

We had a feeling that the great Significant Other behind the universe recognized us and knew us. We felt that sense of approval. We knew what we were here for and we knew what we had to do. God arranged all provisions for us. In Genesis 1:29 God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.”

Obviously God provided for us. We had food, shelter and clothing as we needed it. At the beginning it was his plan that we would just rest in him, do what he had given us to do and he would provide the necessary shelter, food and clothing for us. We wouldn't have to scavenge for it and we wouldn't have to hoard it when we got it. So it was really a restful situation. God gave us tasks to do and he provided for our needs. Then you remember in Genesis 2:9, he went really even further.

Genesis 2:9 – “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.”

So that we wouldn't have to try to produce emotional or spiritual thrills artificially, God provided His own life, the life of His own Spirit in us so that we really could have satisfaction deep down spiritually and deep down satisfaction emotionally.

God gave us the life of that Holy Spirit to give us a sense of enjoyment, happiness, joy and peace. And really the whole thing was beautifully arranged. But, an alien power of some kind, a supernatural power of some kind suggested a whole new set of motives and desires that we should live by. That's really where the thing went wrong.

This power suggested to us, "Why be ruled by God? Why accept the task he gives you? Why don't you command instead of rule? Why spend your life obeying God? Why not spend your life making other people obey you? Why spend your life doing what your Creator wants you to do? Why not spend your life making other people do what you want them to do? Why spend your life looking for God's recognition and approval? Why not make other people approve of you by forcing them to do what you

want them to do?"

Gradually we began to work on that principle. We began to work on the principle that it was our right to rule over other people and that we ought to gain our approval from them by forcing them to obey us. And so, the desire for power began to become almost a personal presence of evil in our world. This supernatural being suggested to us, "Now listen, why depend on God for your food, your shelter and your clothing? Why wait for him to tell you what you need? Why not get what you need and what you want whenever you want it? Why not get the food and the clothing and the shelter that you want and take all of it that you need, whatever that means to anyone else?"

And so the whole urge for profit, for getting the things that we wanted came because we no longer could trust God for it. This urge began to take over many of our lives. We began to live in order to get. That spiritual power suggested to us, "Listen, why depend on God for your joy and peace? Why not be successful in this world? Get success for yourself and force other people to give you enjoyment and pleasure when you want it. It doesn't matter whose life you spoil, why not get enjoyment and satisfaction for yourself?"

So, we went on that tremendous kick just to enjoy ourselves whatever the cost. Those motives and desires for profit, power and success have become the ruling passion of our world. They really have and you know it. That's what has turned the place into a hell instead of the heaven that was planned to be. You know yourselves that most of us live for profit, power, and success. We'll kill and we'll shoot and we'll bomb in order to get profit. You can see it.

We look at the international affair. We tear President Richard Nixon apart and we tear anybody else apart but what the politicians do is an expression of what the nation is. You know in your own heart that often we will do anything for profit. We'll do anything to get what we want and we'll lie and we'll deceive for power. We'll manipulate other people to get a sense of controlling a situation.

You know how often you have lied over an assignment because you want to be able to manipulate that situation as you want. You want to be able to miss the assignment and yet manipulate the situation so that you don't suffer for it. We tend to see that in international affairs but we're so slow to see it in our own lives. It's the same for success. You know how many of us will scramble over the top of the heap any way we can, to get success. To get success in our wife's eyes, to get success in our children's eyes, our friends, eyes or our peers' eyes.

Now brothers and sisters, it's that power that governs so much of the world, that the Bible calls sin. It's that desire to live as if there's no God. And once you decide to live as if there's no God, you have to make some provision for your own needs, for your own physical needs, for your own emotional needs, for the needs of your own mind. Those were all provided for by God's plan -- but once you live as if there's no God, those needs begin to dominate your life. And that becomes a driving personal power of evil inside you. And that's really how it all came about.

We took good needs that God had -- needs of hunger and needs of propagating the race -- and we perverted them into gluttony and into lust. We took a real need to obey God and we turned it into a need to command other people. We took a real need of having God approve of us and we substituted the need for having everybody else approve of us. And so many of us are governed by that. That's what that verse means you see, in Romans 6:6. It's at the end of the verse and it talks, you remember, about being enslaved to sin.

Romans 6:6, "That we might no longer be enslaved to sin." Many of us find ourselves totally enslaved to those desires and you know it. At times when you really want to love other people that old desire for profit gets hold of you and you just want your way whatever it costs to him. There are times when we really want to be willing to do without enjoyment and to receive the enjoyment that God gives us. But that old desire inside us says, "No, we want enjoyment." And so that power of sin, wanting to live without God, enslaves many of us so that we're not free people at all.

You realize it every time you lose your temper. You realize it every time you're envious, every time you're impatient, every time lust gets the upper hand of you. You realize, "I am not a free man, a free woman. I talk a lot about free will but I am not free. I am enslaved to this power inside me."

Now it is interesting, isn't it, to see that that power often uses the body to express itself, when you think of it. It seems that in order to get satisfaction for these things, we have often ended up with our bodies. We weren't getting the thing from God through our spirit and so many of us ended up trying to get them through our body. For instance, exhilaration, the exhilaration and the sense of elation that the Holy Spirit gives, most of us have tried to produce that by working the system backwards through drugs.

You try to pump certain chemicals into your body to give you a kind of emotional lift that will produce the elation and exhilaration that should actually come from God's Spirit. It's interesting how we've gone to our bodies to find that. We've done the same with alcohol. We're meant to live in complete peace without a worry in the world, trusting the Father for every day's need. But we found ourselves bound by worries and so we take alcohol to try to fly high and clear of it (the worries) for a little while.

It's interesting how we use our bodies to try to bring the substitutes for what we can get from God only. The body becomes almost a way of expressing this attitude of sin or independence of God.

It's the same when you think of food, clothing and shelter. Isn't it true that rich and poor alike in our world, seem utterly preoccupied with getting what the cavemen were preoccupied with getting -- something to cover our bodies, something to cover themselves from the rain (a shelter of some kind) and food to fill them and enable them to work the next day.

It is strange, isn't it, that even here in our highly prosperous society that most of us are still preoccupied with food, clothing, and shelter. It doesn't matter if you're Paul Getty. It doesn't matter if you're Onassis. It doesn't matter if you're the poorest person in the theater here, we all seem to be preoccupied with those bodily needs that we have.

It's interesting that the body begins to be the method we have of expressing this independence of God to the world and of fulfilling the needs. You think of it even as far as ruling other people. I know we stop clubbing our wives, (most of us?) but we haven't stopped our B52s [a type of bomber plane]. It's strange that in international affairs and certainly in some other subtle situations, the body is still the method. The might is still the right. We still use our bodies to make other people do what we want them to do in all kinds of subtle ways.

Now do you see that's why God called the body "the body of sin"? Because it is the instrument by which we express our independence of God. So often it has become our method of being independent of God and of getting what we need without God's help. That's why that phrase appears in Romans 6:6.

Romans 6:6 – “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed.” The Greek is “the body of sin” and it doesn't mean that the body is sinful. It doesn't mean that your body is evil. The Manicheans and heretics went away out in that direction. They said the body is evil. It isn't.

God is not teaching that the body is evil. He is teaching that it often becomes a body of sin. It's often the instrument by which we express our independence of God. For instance, we've only to look at a person coming through withdrawal from drugs to see that the body has got used to doing something in a way that is independent of God. It almost has to have the whole process reversed.

So the body has in a sense become a body of sin -- a body used to fulfilling its needs independent of God. That's why that phrase “body of sin” is used. Now why do we all get into this position? It's because we want to. I know you'll say to me, “Oh brother, I don't want to. I don't want to lose my temper. I don't want to get angry. I don't want to rule over other people. I don't want to get what I want independent of what it costs anybody else. I don't want to enjoy myself whoever else suffers.” But brothers and sisters, I say it in love, “You do and that's why we do it.”

There's something inside each of us that makes us want to do these things. There's a selfish will inside us that makes us want to be God of our own lives and do our thing the way we want to do it and have our own way and insist on our own rights whoever suffers. Really loved ones, there's just something in each one of us that is a selfish will -- an evil will. You may say, “I see that. That's the very thing I can't do anything about. I can't do anything about that evil will.” Brothers and sisters, that's what this verse says -- that GOD has done something about it.

You're dead right. A selfish will can't destroy a selfish will. You can't make yourself good with all the willing in the world. But God has destroyed that selfish will miraculously in Jesus. That's why he destroyed us all in Jesus. It's the evil will that is the only truly evil thing in the world. Cancer is bad, promiscuity is bad. All those things are bad. But finally the only thing really evil is an evil will and that's what God destroyed in Jesus.

A lot of people have made the mistake that we ought to destroy the body, the body by which this independence is expressed. That led us into asceticism and all kinds of masochistic practices. We thought, “The body is an evil thing. If you can bring down the body, then you'll be free from lust, and you'll be free from gluttony.” Of course it was a heresy.

The body was not the problem at all. A lot of people said, “Oh, if you can destroy sin, that's the problem. Take sin out of the world and you'll be okay.” Loved ones, you can't destroy that personal power of evil in the world. It resides in thousands and thousands of people. You meet it every day you go out. You can't destroy that.

You see what God did. He destroyed the middleman. He destroyed the link that connects the power of evil up with your body -- that miserable selfish will. Do you see the way the verse reads if you look at it now?

Romans 6:6, “We know that our old self”, (the old selfish will, the old right to itself, the old desire to have its own way), “was crucified with him”, (with Jesus), “So that the sinful body”, (or the body that was used to being the instrument of sin), “might be destroyed”, (the word in Greek is 'rendered inoperative'), “so that that the sinful body might be left unemployed”, (as far as sin was concerned), “and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”

Now brothers and sisters, that's the beginning of the secret of victory in our lives. I know that God will elaborate it for us in these coming Sundays because Paul goes on to talk about this in greater depth. But do you see the heart of the answer to victory is, you cannot will it yourself, but you can be willing for God to destroy that selfish will in you.

You can be willing for God to make that destruction real in you. About 10 years ago, my life changed. I am sure that in many ways my wife, who knows me well, can see I need to change further. But my life changed from being an out-and-out hypocrite -- pretending all the time but never sensing the thing (old sinful nature) inside myself. I came to see that I could not overcome my own selfish will but God had already destroyed it in Jesus and he, by the Holy Spirit, would make that real in me if I was willing. The heart of it is, are you willing to give him the right to do that? That's really it.

Are you willing to give the Creator who made you, the right to destroy your right to your own way? That's really it and that's a pretty deep thing. It took me several weeks and months to think that over before I could decide who was going to be God. I think with most of us, that's really what we need to do. That's a big surrender. I would tell you this -- that if you are willing, God actually does a miracle. God actually does destroy that selfish will, if you're willing for him to do it. So it is a real miracle. Let's pray.

Dear Father, we thank you that you have done the impossible. You have done something about this will that wriggles and rebels inside us. Father we have been struggling for years to overcome it by will power and by substituting better habits. But Father we see now that we've been trying to change something that we are incapable of changing. We thank you Lord that you have brought an answer that is real.

We thank you Father that you did not destroy Jesus instead of us. You destroyed us with Jesus. And you, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as the God of eternity, who sees the past and the future all in one great moment, you are able to lift us into that eternal place where there is no past and there is no future. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, you are able to make that death and destruction real in us, here in the 20th century.

Father, we thank you for that. I pray Father for my brothers and sisters, to whom this is as baffling as it was to me at the beginning. I pray that you, by the Holy Spirit, will as the Sundays pass, make this more and more clear to each one of us. Father, above all I pray that we'll see that when we give you the right to take away our right to our own way, in all kinds of little unimportant things and in all big things, then you're able to fill it completely with your Holy Spirit and make the crucifixion of Christ real in us.

Thank you Father that the work has already been done. Thank you that we don't need to strangle the selfish will. Thank you that it has already been crucified in Jesus. We thank you for that Father in Jesus' name. Amen.