

## Law Destroys Godless Happiness

Romans 7:9

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Were you ever on drugs? Did you ever have just terrible feelings of depression that you could not overcome? Did you ever have problems with loneliness or rejection? Were you so overcome by the meaninglessness and the purposelessness of your own life that you just felt all you could do was commit suicide?

Now I know that there are a lot of you here who would answer, "Yes, before I had any relationship with God at all, I did have some of those feelings." But I think there are many of you, too, who would have to reply as I would, "No, I did not have those feelings so strongly that they spoiled my life."

That's why it's kind of reassuring when you find Jesus' approach to us is never that of a salesman. It's never, "Do you need freedom from guilt? Do you need deliverance from your loneliness? Do you need a purpose in life?" That's never his approach. It's good that it isn't, isn't it? Because if you only accept the truth of our Creator because he meets the needs that you have, then for years after that, you have problems with your own self-centered motives for ever dealing with him in the first place.

That's why also dear ones, the only right attitude that we should take towards each other in regard to Christianity is, "This is the real explanation of reality. This is the truth about your Creator whether it appears to meet your problem or not." And really that's the way Jesus wants us to share the truth with each other.

Dear ones, it is true that many of us have tremendous problems with our lives and could not carry on with our lives before we met Jesus. But it is equally true that many of us seem to adapt very successfully to life without a Creator. I don't know why it is, but it just is a case that if you asked every one of us in this theater this morning, what our lives were like before we met God or met Jesus, some of us would reply, "I was just burdened with depression. I was high on drugs all the time. I was virtually an alcoholic. I had a temper that I could not control." And others of us would say, "Well, my life was kind of quite ordinary. It wasn't terribly bad. It wasn't terribly good."

Now if you say to me, "Why is that so?" I really don't know. It just seems that some of us are able to adapt better than others to living as if there's no Creator in the world. And we are able to do it not absolutely successfully, I agree with you. But we appear to adapt more successfully than others to living as if there's no Creator in the world.

In other words, some of us have refined "practical atheism" to a point where we seem to overcome or cover up the problems that naturally result from living as if there's no God. And we just seem to be able to do it. You'll notice if you study sociology, for instance, that older societies in which Christian values have had more time to percolate and ameliorate the more savage conventions of that society, Christian societies or old societies like that seem to produce more "practical atheists" who are able to live reasonably balanced lives without God, than new societies. Why it is, I really don't know. But loved ones, that's what God means when he prompted Paul to write these words in Romans 7:9. Maybe you'd look at them. And they'll make more sense to you in the light of what we've

just shared.

"I was once alive apart from the law." "I was once alive apart from the law." Now I agree you're dead spiritually, apart from the law. You are dead spiritually. But Paul is indicating that there's some sense in which he was alive as long as he never heard of law. And loved ones, I would have to say that was my own situation. I lived as if there was no God in the universe. But I was brought up in a fairly balanced home, and with a fairly balanced background. And I controlled my emotions and learned to discipline my mind and learned to integrate my personality to some extent. Though I agree with you -- not completely.

I agree there were questions that had no answers. But on the whole, I integrated my personality sufficiently to cover up those areas, to my own mind. And of course, that's the subtle thing about sin. It not only deceives you but it covers its own tracks. And it blinds you to your true situation. So, I developed a fairly balanced personal, domestic and professional life, and managed to avoid incredible catastrophic breakdowns in those areas.

Loved ones, I'd have to say to you probably the majority of people who do not know God live like that. Probably the majority of people who do not depend on God are not incredible drug addicts that are strung out all the time. They're not wild alcoholics that can't do without a drink every hour. They're not people who are filled with tremendous lust that they cannot control. They're normally very nice people who have just adapted very well to living as if there's no God, and at least covering up the problems that normally result from that.

That's really the situation with most of the people in the world. Most people are not desperately overcome by a lust for drink, or driven by a desire for sex every moment of the day. Most people are not tremendously dragged out by desire for incredible riches or massive houses or lots of cars. Most people are fairly balanced people, on the outside, who have learned to adapt to their situations.

Now that, I think, is part of what Paul means. He is saying, "Apart from law, the independent rebellious attitude towards God that was inside me was lying dormant, and was not obvious to me. And I, myself, was in substantial control of my life. I was alive. Sin was lying dormant or dead. The supernatural desire to have my own way, to insist on my own rights, to rebel against God and use everybody for my own purposes, was lying kind of quiet. And I, myself, was in substantial control of my life." That's what being alive means.

Being alive is defined by the dictionary as interaction with your environment. And, loved ones, I would have to say that was my situation. I was in fair degree of control of my relationships with other people and my relationships with my environment. And I'd have to say I wasn't strung out on drugs. And I wasn't overcome by tremendous desires that I could not control -- at times yes, but normally no.

Now that's what Paul is referring to when he says that he was once alive apart from law. Now loved ones, people like me -- or if you were the same, people like you -- we are the noble sinners. We are the noble sinners, because we look as if we're handling the situation okay. We're not really but we look as if we're handling it. And we persuade ourselves that we're handling it okay. Our situation is far worse than a drug addict, far worse than a dear alcoholic, far worse than a dear prostitute, because at least they see that some things are wrong. We are the natural men and women who think that nothing is wrong, and think that everything is all right. That's what is so dangerous about that situation.

That's why loved ones -- if I could just give a byline in a little commercial. That's why it's not good to always approach the world from the point of view of its needs, you see. That's why it's so dangerous, perhaps, to specialize in drug-addiction or alcoholism, because if you have ever come up against somebody who isn't in either one of those categories, you often find you haven't too much of an answer to give. And so it's important to present the truth about God in Jesus, as the explanation of reality, as truth. Whether it answers people's problems or not, this is truth, and you have to deal with it.

Now loved ones, many of us I think are in the situation where we're not tremendously conscious of a need at all. We're living fairly balanced lives, fairly happy, professional, personal and domestic lives and we're not terribly aware that anything is wrong. And if you accused us of being atheists or agnostics, we would reject that with all the power that we could submit. And we'd say, "No, we're Christians. Certainly we believe in God." But we would actually be living lives independent of God.

Now that's what Paul means when he says, "I was once alive apart from the law." And so all of us fall into one of two categories before God deals with us. Either we are terribly defeated people in our own personal lives, and we're overcome by some tremendous addiction or some tremendous habit that we cannot control, or we are these noble sinners that seem to be managing surprisingly well without God.

Now that all changes, dear ones, when something takes place that Paul describes in the rest of that verse. You see Romans 7:9, "But when the commandment came, sin revived and I died." And I'd have to say that my situation depended on me blinding myself consciously and deliberately to the law that God had given. While I ignored the standards that God had set up for people who lived in his world, I was okay. While I ignored the kind of life that could be lived here on earth, according to God, I was safe in my own blindness and my own ignorance.

But as soon as law began to come before me, I discovered there was something inside me that had been lying there dormant all the time. There was a resistance to God's will that had been sleeping there, that began to rise inside me, and seemed to be provoked by this very law. In other words, we're okay until we look at a verse like Galatians 5:22. And we see the kind of life that we were really meant to live. We see it either in a persona like Jesus or we see it described in verses like these.

"But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law." And we say, "Oh, that's beautiful. Yes, that's the kind of life that certainly I'd like to live whenever it's possible. I would like to be like that." And then our eyes catch the last half of verse 21(b).

"I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." And we look at the "such things" that they should not do in Galatians 5:19. "The works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissention, party-spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." And we rebel.

We say, "Anger? Somebody who has anger will not inherit the kingdom of God?" And the noble sinner begins to get worried and begins to see, "But nobody can avoid anger. I mean, anger is a natural part of life. You can't cut those of us who have anger out of the kingdom of God." And for the first

time we begin to discover something wriggling inside us, that we never really saw before when we were noble sinners. And we begin to see a rebellion inside us that we never realized was there at all.

So we try to use the Bible against ourselves. And we say, "Well now that's stupid. Look at Psalm 4:4. And that's plain. Obviously God even commands us to be angry." And we begin to try to defend ourselves against this law. And of course, even our very attempted defense is evidence that there's something inside us that isn't absolutely aligned with God's will. And we look at Psalm 4:4. "Be angry, but sin not."

"Now there it is. You have to be angry, but don't sin. Now, why then, why then do those who have any anger, why are they in danger of missing the kingdom of God?" And then of course, we pack it up and we say, "I mean, Jesus himself was angry." And we look up the verse of Jesus walking through the temple and driving out the money-lenders. Let's look at John 2:14-16.

Of course dear ones, the important thing, and why I am taking you through the verses is, do you see that the very stirring inside us that is anxious to get a bit of the Bible that agrees with us, is part of the proof that there's something inside that isn't right with God, and that isn't aligning with his will.

"In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away. You shall not make my Father's house a house of trade.'" And we say, "Now there, there was anger. It's obvious."

Then God's Spirit is good, and points us to the next verse, and says to us, "But do you see why Jesus was angry? His disciples remember that it was written 'Zeal for thy house will consume me.'" And the Holy Spirit begins to whisper in our ears, "You see the motive of your anger is important. Is your anger for yourself, because somebody has yet again used your towel, or has yet again taken the loan of your winter coat? Or is it anger on behalf of your dear Father in heaven and on behalf of his cause? And when things happen in Washington that you don't agree with, are you angry because they're taking advantage of you, or somebody who should be protecting your interests is in fact using you? Or are you angry on behalf of God's justice and God's truth?"

We begin to see that motive is important in anger. And then if you look at Matthew 5:22, you can see that there's another element that is vital in an anger that is according to God's will, and is not that anger that is against his will.

"But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother, shall be liable to the council and whoever says, 'You fool', shall be liable to the hell of fire." In other words, anybody that loses control of themselves and calls out, "You fool", or insults his brother without any self-control, that person is sinning. So there just is a vast difference between anger that is on behalf of God and that is controlled and an anger that is uncontrolled and selfish. And so we begin to sink back and that resentment grows inside us.

It's the same loved ones, with other things. If you look at any part of God's law, look at Matthew 6:34, "Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." And we begin to think of the hours we spent in the car

or the hours we spent lying in bed worrying about tomorrow, wondering about the money that we wouldn't get, worrying about the people that we wouldn't meet, about the things that we haven't done, about the things that we shouldn't have said. And there begins to grow inside us, a kind of rebellion against God's own word.

We begin to feel, "That's wrong. You shouldn't regard that as a sin just because you're anxious about tomorrow." And we begin to be aware that there's something inside us that is not aligned with God. And the moment the law begins to impinge upon us, dear ones, that moment we begin to be aware that there's something inside us that does not agree with our Father in heaven. And the noble sinner begins to come under conviction. And that's what Paul means, you see, when he says, "When the commandment came, sin revived and I died." The sin was never really dead. It was there all the time. But it only began to revive and take on a visible, noticeable form when the law began to cut across us where it hurt.

The specific purpose of the law is to show us where we're still jarring against God's law. Oh, it's like the dentist's office, which I happen to know well. [Pastor O'Neill's wife is a dentist.] And my wife says if you use an "explorer" (I always get the terms wrong so she'll kill me) -- a dentist uses an explorer to discover decay in your tooth -- at least that's one of the ways. And they run it along your tooth, you remember, and if it sticks, then there's possible decay there. And it's the same with the law.

The law is designed by God to run along your life, to feel along that life of yours, and anywhere where the law sticks, is where there's some decay and where there's some sin. And loved ones, don't get into the position where you say, "Oh well, Pastor, you're talking just about life before we become a Christian, aren't you?" No, God's law is good, loved ones.

God's law is to deal with us throughout our Christian lives, for us to regard it as a dear friend who will help us. God's law is there to pick out areas where we have become a little dead to God's will, to pick out areas where we have never even come alive, perhaps. God's law is there to show us places where sin is beginning to come alive again in our lives. And so wherever you feel the law is sticking or jarring inside your life, God is pointing out some decay there. That's why this verse runs as it does.

"I was once alive apart from law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died." In other words, once you can rationalize the law, and as long as you can talk around it, it cannot do the job that it was created to do. But the moment you allow that law to come home to you and to speak plainly to you, then you will begin to identify that supernatural, independent rebellion against God, that lies hidden inside you, for what it is.

Really that's what the law does. It forces that little hard knot of resistance to God's will, forces it to become crystallized, so that you can at last see it for what it is. That's why, for instance, many of us, after the law begins to deal with us, find that we have certain ruling passions in our lives that we never knew of.

Remember, Alexander Pope, the 18th century poet, talked about a ruling passion. Or the Bible in Hebrew, you remember, talks about it as a besetting sin. And the noble sinner walks along quite confidently until the law cuts across his life, and he begins to realize and become aware that yes, his life is dominated by some things. Just as the poor old drug addict's life has been dominated by drug addiction, or the alcoholic's by alcoholism, so his life is dominated in a more subtle way,

with certain ruling passions.

So first you know, the law begins to awaken you. And then it begins to really bear in on you, and convict you, and normally begins to come in on some of the areas that the Bible talks about: the lust of the flesh, or the pride of life, or the lust of the eyes. And we feel, "Oh, there's no lust of the flesh or lust of the eyes in my life." And then perhaps we read a verse. Or maybe you'd look at it, just for a moment, Matthew 6:19. I suppose we always think of the sisters as being more open to this, but I think if it comes to motorbikes and automobiles, the brothers are in close, I suppose.

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal." And God's Spirit gets to us a wee bit on how much money we are spending on the clothes, or just how much we do love the house, or how much money we put into the apartment furniture. Maybe it's not even so much money that you put into it, but how you feel about it. Would you be happy enough for it to go tomorrow? Would you be ready enough to give it to somebody if God directed you tomorrow? And we begin to be aware that there are some areas in our lives where we are not agreeing with God.

And then we begin to gradually come under conviction, as this sin inside us revives, and there stands up something inside us that says, "Well, that's ridiculous stuff anyway. Nobody lives like that. We have a right to our human comforts, and we have a right to the things that we need." And then sin comes out in the open. And you see it for the monster that it is.

Loved ones, that's good. I know that seems bad, but that's good. That's a far healthier position to be in than the position of the noble sinner who didn't know anything was wrong. That's why, in a way, -- a brother talked about the girl who was in despondency. In a way, sometimes that can be healthier than some of the easy-going happiness of the noble sinner.

Loved ones, it's just true. We don't know the state we're in, until God's law shows us, really. And we will never be prepared to turn from having our own way in our lives, until we see the monster of independent rebellion that rules inside us. And it's the law's purpose to reveal that to us. And then it's our place to turn from it and say, "Thank you, Lord. I do not want to be ruled by a monster. I want to be living my own life and to be myself. And I want to be able to control my life for you and for your glory. And I don't want any longer to be controlled by these tremendous drives and desires that either explicitly or implicitly have been running my life. Father, I want to give it to you. And I am willing to do without any of these things that I say I need, if you'll come in and live Jesus' life over again inside." And, loved ones, that's the purpose of the law -- to bring us to that place.

Do you see why I can't apologize to you for the law? And I can't take the attitude that I want to anesthetize you all, and get you into heaven without knowing it. And I can't make it always just a happy-happy thing. The law is good. The law is a dear friend to us. The law is the only instrument that God has, besides the beauty of his own Son's life, to reveal to us where we are actually in controversy with our Creator.

So dear ones, we need to treasure it and cherish it. And we need to encourage each other to respond to it as a dear friend. And we need to treat it as the dentist treats the "explorer". And even though we may not like the work that they do in our mouths, yet we know it's essential to do it, to get rid of the cavities. So it is essential for God to probe with the law so that he can get rid of

all this sickness inside us. And really, it's the only way.

So don't look away from the places where the law is jarring on your life. Don't look away from them, please. Look at those places now. Don't try to overcome them yourself, but ask the Holy Spirit now to begin to show you why you do that kind of thing in that area of your life, and in what way you're still trying to be God instead of letting God be God. It's just really a great release to you, because he is. Let us pray.