

THE CARNAL ATTITUDE (ROMANS 7:14)

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

You probably remember the scene, because it, I am sure, occurred in all our homes when we were children. And you say, "I can't." And your mom says, "There is no such word as 'can't.'" And even though you know we kind of suspected that semantically she was not correct, and probably practically she was not correct, yet we kind of felt, "Well, this is one of the clichés that parents have to keep passing on to their children to keep mankind from tipping over into a chaos of despair." And so we kind of accept it, "Okay, okay, I can't. I know there's no such word as 'I can't,' and every time I say, 'I can't,' I must remember there's no such word as 'I can't.' So I should translate it into basic English, 'I am not able.'" "No, I can't."

So we would say, "All right, all right, there's no such word." And yet loved ones, you admit that, ever from your childhood days, your own life has probably been plagued with the reality of that word, because how many times have you and I said, "I can't?" "I can't stop eating the things I am not supposed to. I can't stop swearing. I want to, but I can't. I can't stop drinking coke. I can't stop eating ice cream. I can't stop getting irritable. I want to, but I can't. I can't stop drinking beer. I want to, but I can't. I can't stop being sarcastic. I want to, but I can't. I can't stop being greedy and self-centered. I want to, but I can't."

Really, if you think of how many things in your life and in mine, we apply that word to, you'll see something of the size of the problem, that even though we agree with our moms and dads up here, yet down here in our hearts, we have had to admit that there are a hundred things that we cannot do, and that have stolen away some of the confidence that we had in ourselves, and in our own ability to live a successful life.

You remember we talked about it last Sunday. And we did say that one of the elements in that 'can't' experience is that often we can't, because we don't want to badly enough. You remember I shared the instance of the dear brother who had been praying for years and years about stopping smoking, and had often discussed stopping smoking, "Yes, I must stop smoking. I want to stop destroying my body--this body that God has given me." And then a week or so ago, the dentist informed him that there was something in the back of his mouth that looked like tissue that was becoming cancer, and that was very likely to become cancer, if he continued to smoke.

Suddenly, it wasn't just a case of an annoying expensive habit that he had, that it would be a good idea to stop if he could, suddenly it became clear to him, "This is a matter of life and death. If I don't stop it, I am going to die of cancer."

I think that's true, isn't it, that often we can't stop a thing if we want to badly enough, or if we see the consequences of our present line of action clearly enough. And often we simply refuse to stop doing things, because we don't really see the dire effect that they're having on our lives.

You remember we shared that that's one of the purposes of the law. It is to make it clear to us where our present line of action is taking us. And maybe you'd like to look at that verse, and then we could go on to today's verse in a moment. Romans 7:13(b), you remember. It's one of the purposes of God's law to really reveal to us the deadly consequences of the things that we are now doing. It's the last part of that verse, you see. It's the verse that begins, "Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?" Well, then if you go down three lines: "...And through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure." And Paul says, "It was sin that, through the commandment,

became sinful beyond measure."

One of the purposes of God's law is to show us the absolute effrontery of some of the things that we're doing in our lives that we think are just little inconvenient inexpediences. And part of the purpose of God's law is to show us, "Look, this is rebellion against your maker. You're cutting yourself off from the life of your own creator when you do this and therefore, you poison yourself to death".

You remember we looked at one or two of the instances like that in our lives. Some of us, I think, have often experienced homosexual tendencies. We don't practice homosexuality. There's no overt act. But many of us have had drawings at times to people of our own sex. And often we say, "I can't, I can't turn from it. I can't stop it. It's just part of me." And really loved ones, often we say that, because we don't see the light in which God thinks of that kind of relationship. And you get it there, you know, in Leviticus 20:13. This was one of the verses we looked at last day briefly.

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall be put to death. Their blood is upon them." Part of purpose of the law is to show us the deadly consequences of the line of action we're taking. Same with the wife swapping business: I think it's very easy in a society where "Uptight Couples" was on the best-known books list. It's very easy for us to become a little easy going, even in the way we look at other people in an office. And I think it's important to see the way God looks at it in Leviticus 20:10.

"If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death". I think some of us you know, say, "Oh well, we're not in that position." But, you remember, Jesus said, "If you look at a woman to lust after in your heart, you've already committed adultery".

So loved ones, I think sometimes we say, "We can't," because we don't really want to, badly enough. And we really could, if we wanted to. I think that's why often many of us go to some more like "Youth Conflicts", and we suddenly find a new life coming into us, because old Bill Gothard is used by God often to show you, "Look, you either do it or you don't." And you die in the process.

Loved ones, often I think our 'can't' is based on the fact that we don't really want to badly enough. Nevertheless, I think all of us would be prepared to say, "Yeah, I have experienced that. But I know many people who have known what smoking was doing to their lungs, and they've gone on smoking themselves into an agonizing cancer death."

In other words, one element in 'can't' is that we don't really want to. Or that we don't see the consequences of the line of action we're taking. But there does seem to be some other element, doesn't there, because very often we do know what the consequences of our action is, and we still cannot break out of it. And it seems the more the law is preached to us or shared with us, the more agonized we get about it, because we want to, we want to, but they can't. And we see where it's leading us, but we still can't. We can't stop swearing. We can't stop being promiscuous. We can't stop being unclean. We can't stop this habit, or we can't stop saying those things.

So it seems that, yes, part of the 'can't' is that we don't see the consequences of our actions or that we don't really want to badly enough. But there seems to be another element, dear ones. There seems to be something else inside each one of us that makes us say "We can't," even after we've seen it--where our 'can't' is going to take us.

Old Dostoevsky talked about it you know, in almost every novel he wrote but here is the way he put it in one of them. "A man will talk to you with excitement and passion of the true normal interests of man. With irony, he will upbraid the short-sighted fools who do not understand their own interests, nor the true significance of virtue. And within a quarter of an hour, without any hidden outside provocation, but simply through something inside him which is stronger than he is, than all his interests, he will go off on quite a different task, that is, act in direct opposition to what he was just being saying about himself, in opposition to the laws of reason, in opposition to his own advantage, in fact in opposition to everything."

Loved ones, I think that's true, isn't it? That very often we have come to situations where we have done just what Dostoevsky's character does. We have talked in high and holy terms of the way we ought to live, and the way others ought to live, and yet we turned round, and for no apparent reason, have gone exactly in the opposite direction. In fact, it bewildered us, because we felt, "They're not that kind of person at all." And yet it's true.

Dostoevsky says, "The only reason a man will act against his own best advantage is to get his own way." And isn't it true that even if it means smoking ourselves to death, even it means drinking ourselves into a situation where our liver is worthless, whatever damage we're doing to ourselves, often we will find that there's some part of us that still wants to go on doing that.

You remember old Stevenson [Robert Louis Stevenson 1850 -1894, Scottish writer] put it on paper better probably than anyone when he wrote the fable of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And Jekyll was a respectable doctor until he drank this potion. And then, you remember, out from inside him there came a Hyde that could sadistically and indiscriminately commit murders, and had none of the respect for humanity that the Jekyll had.

Loved ones, doesn't it seem, that at times when we say we can't, there's almost something or someone else inside us that's saying that. In other words, the problem isn't with the doing. The problem is not just that we do stupid things or we do wrong things. The problem is not just that we say unkind things. The problem is not just that we think unclean thoughts. It's not the doing that's the problem; it's the being.

There's something being inside us that seem almost apart from us. There seems to be something or someone inside us that persists in being willing to do the very thing that will even destroy our own lives. And loved ones, that's really the problem that Paul is beginning to deal with in these next verses. He makes that same point. He makes the point, "The problem with your 'can't' in your life is not your doing; it's your being. It's something to do with the kind of person you are".

Now maybe you'd look at it. He puts it just very straight and plain and easy to understand. It just might interest you, because I see two friends who invited to their home, one evening, during the past couple of weeks, one of the members of the history department at the 'U' [University of Minnesota]. And this dear brother spends a good many summers traveling to Russia. And he was sitting in the house of one of the Russian intellectuals, discussing this very problem, how we seemed, as men who want to do the right, but there seemed to be something else in us, that was doing the wrong.

The Russian intellectual was expounding on this most enthusiastically. And the friend from the 'U' here, said, "Well you know why; Paul put that better than anybody." And the Russian said, "Really?"

Where?" And the friend from the 'U' said, "Do you have a bible?" And the old Russian intellectual went behind all his books, and right down the back of the bookcase, and brought an old dusty bible out, you know. And this brother didn't know if he'd be able to find the right verse, but he at last found it.

Of course the Russian was just amazed, you know, and said, "This deserves a footnote, at least, in my book." But it seems that, even though all literature has tried to deal with this problem, yet Paul seems to deal with it better than anybody else, dear ones.

And here's the heart of it. It's Romans 7:14. "We know that the law is spiritual..." And then you see the next line, not, "But I do bad things; but I say some unclean words; but I think some impure thoughts." No. "But I am carnal, sold under sin". Loved ones, it's back to the 'being' problem. In other words, part of the problem that we have with 'can't,' is, we're not just underestimating the evil consequences of our line of action, or our behavior pattern; we're underestimating the problem itself.

We keep thinking, "It's just a matter of changing my habits. I just have to change my habit. I just need to think more positively about myself. I have to think more positively and optimistically about life. I have to just curb my tongue a little more. I just have to control my eating habits a little more. I simply have to spend more time reading and studying than I have before." We are always saying that kind of thing.

Loved ones, the problem is not doing; the problem is being. We are underestimating the whole problem, that, it's because we are certain kind of people, that we do and say certain kinds of things. See, it's like having a disease, like measles. And the old spots are coming out there. And you're saying, "I must get rid of those spots. Okay, try the old white paint." And it breaks and cracks. "Try the old sandpaper..." And you're always dealing only with symptoms, symptoms, symptoms. The problem is the disease.

And that's what Paul says, "Look, the law is spiritual but I am carnal. I am the wrong kind of person. That's why I want to do the wrong kinds of things". See, we're fools. We like to think, "No, no Pastor, no I am not really like that. No, no, I just lost my temper, lost my temper; that's once I lost my temper. I am not really bad-tempered, no, no. Now, I was a bit sarcastic there. Yeah, that's just once I was sarcastic, but I am not really sarcastic. Yeah, well, that was an impure thought, but I am not really an impure person. I am really very pure. Yeah, I did laze around yesterday, but I am not a lazy person".

Loved ones, we're always bluffing ourselves, you see. And that's why we get into such trouble, because we keep on pretending that this is only a superficial little behavior pattern that we have developed, and that we can wipe out ourselves. And the whole agony of it is, we try to wipe it out ourselves, because we think we can, because we think it's a matter of 'doing' and not 'being.'

Old Paul says, "I am carnal". Jesus comes right down the same line, loved ones, really. Just look at it in Luke 6. And Jesus lays us down right in the same place. Luke 6:43, "For no good tree bears bad fruit."

"But Lord, I don't lose my temper often."

"Nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are

not gathered from thorns."

"Yeah, yeah Lord, I know but I am really patient you know, that was just that once."

"Nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks".

Dear ones, that's the truth. You really are what you do and what you say and what you think. So am I. We should stop bluffing. And it's the failure to recognize this that has led many churches to describe these next verses in Romans, as the description of a normal Christian life. It isn't. It's a description of a defeated Christian life.

But often our churches have been led into feeling, "Yeah, you have to face the fact that there's a 'can't' in our life that we can't get rid of. It's just there; you can't do anything about it." And they've been led to that position, more, because they have failed to recognize the depth of the problem, than any other reason.

Loved ones, Paul says, we have a disease. And it's carnality. "I am carnal. That's why I get bad temper. That's why I lose patience with people. That's why I think unclean thoughts. That's why I say bad words. That's why I am sarcastic with people. It's not because inside there's a pure holy saint, that is just imprisoned in this terrible outside. No, it's because, inside there's a dirty rotten sinner, that shows himself in the words and actions and thoughts that he expresses outwardly."

Loved ones, the first step toward some kind of deliverance, is recognition of that, honestly. You may say to me, "Oh Pastor, that pessimism. That's terrible." But loved ones, the beginning of any kind of deliverance, is to see that the problem is, the person you are. Old Isaiah, you remember, said, not, "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips and at times I say unclean words." He said, "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, and I am a man of unclean lips."

Loved ones, the first step is recognizing that you are carnal. You're a carnal person. You have an attitude inside you that is carnal. And the beginning of recognizing that is like an alcoholic beginning to say, "I am an alcoholic." It's the beginning of deliverance.

What is it to be carnal? Well, do you see in Romans 7 there, it's pretty obvious that it's at least the opposite of being spiritual? You can see that. Romans 7:14, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin." So, "The law is spiritual, and I am carnal." So carnal is opposite to spiritual.

And you remember you get that kind of reference again in 1 Corinthians 3:1, "I could not address you as spiritual men but as carnal", and maybe it will be good to look at it because it does clear away one heresy that many of us get into at times. "But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh..." or as carnal men, "As babes in Christ". Now loved ones, do you see it's 'spiritual men' or 'carnal men'? In other words, it's carnal human or spiritual human. It's not carnality as opposed to humanity. It's not humanity as opposed to spirituality, because some people say, you see, when they lose their temper, "Oh I am just human. I am only human." No you're not. You're subhuman. When you're losing your temper, you're carnal; and that's subhuman.

No. God made us to be human beings who were like Jesus. That's perfect humanity. The problem we get into in our psychology is, often, that we're studying pathological situations, rather than the pure, perfect situation in Jesus. So carnality is not humanity. Carnality is opposed to spirituality.

Now think for a moment what it means when it says the law is spiritual. Well, the law is spiritual, in that, it's directed by God's will. And it describes the kind of life that flows through God's body. So it describes the kind of life that God and Jesus live, and it's directed by their will.

Now carnality is the opposite. Carnality is a life that is directed by the 'sarx'. And those of you know Greek, know that 'Sarx' is one of the words used in the bible for 'flesh', or in the Greek language, in the classics, for 'flesh'. But it's not simply flesh in the sense that 'Soma' is. 'Soma' is body--you know. 'psychosomatic' disease. 'Soma' is the normal Greek word for body. 'Sarx' is body being dominated by itself.

In other words, when Paul says, "I am carnal," he means, "I am dominated by the needs of my body. I am dominated by the need for hunger. I am dominated by the need to enjoy myself. I am dominated by the need to get my own way, and to rule over myself." And when those things begin to dominate in your life, then the hunger turns into gluttony and the sexual procreation turns into lust. And the self-defense turns into self-deification.

And so, what Paul is saying is, "I am dominated by the outside needs of my body and of my relationships with other people and of my relationship to the world. I am utterly dominated by those things. I am driven by those things and not by God, himself". That's what it means to be carnal.

It means that your life is dominated by what other people think of you, by what you need to do to get yourself forward in life, or in your career, by what you need to get enough clothes for your back, by what you need to do to gain some kind of influence over other people. That's carnality. When Paul says, "I am carnal," he says, "I am driven by the needs of my body, the needs of other people, the needs of the world but not by God." And loved ones, that's why we're such a mess, because that's our nature.

God's law is spiritual. It's directed by the Father's will and by the Father's desires. Our lives are directed by the things we need to do to defend ourselves against other people, to get ourselves up on top of the heap over above other people, to satisfy our bodies both sexually and physically and food-wise. That's what carnality is. "I am carnal. I want to satisfy these things independent of God." and our problem is our carnality.

What are the real advantages of knowing it? Well someone greater than ourselves has to do something with it, haven't we? If my problem is my nature, then I can't change my nature. I am an Irishman and I cannot change into an American. I can do things that Americans do. Maybe after 40 more years I'll have an American accent. But I still won't be a native American. I can change citizenship, but I won't be a native American. You can't change your own nature.

If you're a dog you can't change yourself into being a man. If you're an American you can't change yourself into being a German. The only person who can do that is someone greater than you, someone more powerful than you. Loved ones, that's a great step to take, to stop patching up, a patch here, a patch there, a little bit of self-discipline there, a new book--oh, you know, "If you're okay, I'm okay." That was a great help to all of us--another little book that gives us an extra little dynamic and gives us a little more control than we had before.

Loved ones, stop doing that and see, if it's my whole nature needs to be changed, then somebody greater than me needs to do it. That's one tremendous advantage. Another advantage is this; it stops the striving and the straining. It does. It stops you trying to do it yourself. It stops you trying--it's you stop trying, "All right, I must try, I must try, I must make myself a better person."

And you change completely and you begin to express trust and obedience to that person--like an operation: appendix. Ever taken out your own appendix? It's tricky--no, you couldn't. You couldn't do it. If you have appendicitis, you decide someone greater than me has to take care of this. So what do you do? You go to a surgeon that you trust, and you say, "Whatever you want me to do, I'll do. And I'll trust myself to your power and your skills."

It's the same with this business of carnality. Loved ones, once you really admit how bad you are, once you really admit that it's your nature that has to be changed, then it stops all that striving and the straining. No trying to climb up onto operating tables and trying to get the knife pointed at the right spot on your tummy. No more of that. Just a trust and an obedience; a saying, "Father, this is me, just as I am. And I am carnal. And this is the way I am. And I keep being dictated to by forces other than you. Lord God, I'll do whatever you tell me, if you'll change that in me."

Now loved ones, that's the beginning of deliverance.

During the next Sundays I am going to try to talk at depth, in depth about this. But that's the beginning of deliverance. Stop pretending. Stop pretending you're better than the rest of us. Stop pretending you're better than what Paul said he was. Stop pretending that you're really very saintly deep down. Admit loved ones, you're just a carnal person. And unless God changes that, you're going to have trouble with the stuff that comes out from inside, for the rest of your life.

No, you know, I just--I want to encourage you, even though I can't go faster than Paul takes us. I want to encourage you that there is just a great deliverance from that. But the basis of it is, what I came to nine years ago in my own life; I am this person. I am not just really good underneath with a few little bad things that I do in my life, I am really carnal and evil inside. That's the start loved ones. God can change that. That's the beauty of it.

If you can't wait for next week then you should read 'The Normal Christian Life' by Watchman Nee, or a little tract that I wrote 'Free To Live Through Death To Self'. And better than any of those, you just ask God.