

The Death of the Flesh

Romans 8:3

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you ever felt in your own life that it was really easier to do wrong than to do right? Have you ever felt that? I think all of us kind of feel it in connection with circumstances. I know that. Most of us have felt, "Well it's easier, at times, to lie about a missed appointment than it is to admit that you forgot clean about it, and face the embarrassment of that."

So obviously in circumstances, it's often easier to do wrong than to do right. But I am really asking you the question in connection with your own personality structure. Have you ever felt, "Well, my personality inside seems to make it easier for me to do wrong than to do right? The way I am built seems to make it easier for me to want to get my own way than to let others have their way. My own personality seems to be built in such a way that it seems easier for me to be proud of what I have done and to want people to praise me for it than it is for me to be humble about what I have done and want instead to point to other people's achievements." Have you ever felt that, "Well, yeah, my personality inside seems to make it easier for me to criticize other people and to point out problems and short comings in other people's lives than it is for me to point out their good points and praise them?" In other words, have you ever felt that it seems that you were made to do the wrong thing rather than to do the right thing?

I think probably most of us here would say, "Yeah, yeah, I've often wondered, when you talk about living a victorious life and living in love and gentleness with other people -- I've often wondered, yeah. But my own personality doesn't seem made to do that as much as it seems made to do the wrong thing." And in fact, most of us who have any notion of psychology or sociology, know that many of our psychologists and sociologists build up whole theories on the basis of the fact that it is more natural to do the wrong than to do the right. I mean, I know many marriage counselors who tell couples, "Let your anger out. Express it! You must let it out to each other. That's good for you. It's the natural thing to do, you ought to do it."

And most of us, in our educational system, have been encouraged to choose our career on the basis of what will fulfill us -- not so much what society may most need, though we try to bring that into the picture also. But usually we have received the emphasis, "How will you be best fulfilled? How will you best find satisfaction?"

I think ego building, peer recognition, praise and approval are all respected by all of us as legitimate motives for encouraging people to achieve worthwhile aims. And you must admit, loved ones, that the reason why these theories are so powerful to us even this morning -- even this morning I can almost sense that some of you say, "Well, well, is that not right? I mean peer recognition, that's the important thing, and approval and praise..." We are so brainwashed in this that most of us really wonder, "Well, what's wrong with those things?" And of course those theories are so palatable to us, because all of us have this bent in our personalities towards putting ourselves before other people. We really have.

Many of us would say, "Yeah, yeah, well, yeah, but isn't that just being human?" And it's strange but, do you see what's happening among us? We're beginning to regard putting ourselves first as so much the norm that we're beginning to build a society together that regards it as healthy to think

of these things as the norm. It's healthy to want to fulfill yourself. It's healthy to put yourself first. It's healthy to seek approval from other people.

And I think you'd agree, that the only reason any of us even question this tendency towards putting ourselves first, or this naturalness in us to do wrong rather than right -- the only reason why we even question it, is that our conscience, at times, clicks, when we see what somebody like Nixon [U.S. president involved in the Watergate scandal] can do to the families of people like John Dean, or other littler people down the line.

And we see it in ourselves. Our conscience clicks, at times, and we wonder, "What's going to happen to others? What's going to be the effect on others, if I keep getting my own way and putting their way aside? If I keep building myself up, whatever effect it has on them, then what's going to happen to them?" And that's the only reason why we even question it I think, that our conscience checks us at times and says, "Yeah, but this may be natural in you to do this. It may be natural in you to do wrong. It may be more natural for you to do wrong than right. It may be just second nature to you to put yourself first, but what's going to happen to everybody else if you do that? And worse, what's going to happen to you if everybody else does that?" And we begin to think, "Yeah, well, it is natural for us to do wrong rather than right, but we can see that if we keep on doing this, we're going to be in trouble."

That's, of course, why, so many of us who have gone to such marriage counselors who have told us to express our anger -- we've had to stop following their advice before we pulled the whole home apart, because when you express a thing, it just intensifies it and grows. And you end up yelling at so many decibels at each other everyday. And it's just wearing in the throat eventually. And so most of us have had to eventually step back from that kind of advice and say, "Well yeah, it may be true but we have to modify it in someway."

Of course the fact is, loved ones, it's just not true advice. It's just not right. It's really the attempt of all of us to make wrong comfortable for us. It's the attempt of all of us to make each other comfortable in the face of this tendency in us to do wrong --in the face of this naturalness that we find inside of us to do the wrong rather than to do the right, this basic tendency towards evil that the law can do nothing about. The law can only restrain it a little, expose it a lot, and provoke it a lot. But the law can't do anything with it.

You could see this I think if you looked at a verse with me. It's Romans 12:10. Then let's just extrapolate it in our own situation here as a group. "Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor." The Authorized Version has that good phrase, "Prefer one another. Prefer others before yourself."

Now let's just think how we respond to that. Well, I think outwardly, we try to do that. We come into a group like this and two of you are making for the door at the one time, and you realize, "Well yeah, prefer the other before yourself, or at least don't trample over them, because that doesn't look too Christian." And so you step back and, okay, we can let each other through the door first. It's a narrow door, and it demands that degree of grace from us. So we step back and we let the other person through.

You're coming down the row there and one person is going into the same row as you, so you step back, and you let them in. You prefer the other before yourself. Indeed, the other person has no Bible so you are prepared to give them the Bible and do without it yourself. Or they need a songbook and so

you move the songbook along the line. So outwardly, I think, most of us try to prefer the other before ourselves.

It's a bit difficult if after this service you find yourself kind of left out in the cold. Everybody else is talking wildly and happily and animatedly and you're standing at the side, kind of looking and putting your hands in your pockets, if you're a guy, or fiddling with your hair if you're a girl, and trying to look kind of nonchalant. And everybody else is in conversation groups, and you're on your own. And you just begin to feel a bit left out. And you want to prefer them before yourself. You want them to enjoy themselves more than you're enjoying yourself, but there is a wee thing inside that wriggles and says, "Oh, why am I always the wallflower? Why am I always left out?" Or somebody says something humorous about you in a conversation that is also cutting. And you want to prefer the other before yourself -- you want them to have the fun of making the joke and being thought a comedian, but it kind of is hurting you, and it's hard to prefer the other before yourself, if in doing that it hurts you.

In other words, the Bible stuff is all right and the songbook passing is okay, because it doesn't hurt you too much. You know the songs reasonably. Sometimes you're not too anxious to read the Bible with everybody else, anyway. But when the thing begins to hurt you a little, the 'preferring the other before yourself' becomes just a little difficult deep-deep down.

Or we're all going out of the auditorium and everybody seems to be in groups but you and you seem to be going out alone and nobody has spoken to you except the fellow who gave you the songbook or the girl that gave you the Bible. And you're going out and you're kind of going home to your apartment, to your room, and there's nobody else there. And you are not too sure what you'll do for the lunch, because you have nothing that you can warm there. And so you're beginning to feel, "Oh, everybody else has somebody to go with and I haven't..." And it's not long before the old self-pity is up, you know. And there's that natural tendency inside us, it seems, to pity ourselves or to resent a wee bit other people. And it's at that level, loved ones, at the level of our attitudes and our motives and our responses that it seems difficult to prefer the other before ourselves.

It seems that we can prefer the other before ourselves as long as it isn't hurting us personally. But when it begins to hurt us, when we begin to have to go down in the dirt in order to prefer the other before ourselves, there's something inside us that opposes that. There's something inside us that makes it more natural to prefer ourselves before everybody else.

Now that's the thing that the law can do nothing about. The law can just exacerbate that situation. It can just provoke it and make it worse. The law keeps coming down the line, "Prefer others before yourself." And you say, "Yeah, well I want to, I want to, but if I prefer other before myself, I am going to go down forever. They're going to treat me like a doormat." And we react against it.

Now loved ones, that's what God is saying to us this morning in his word. And maybe you'd look at, it's Romans 8:3. "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do." You see the name that God gives to that tendency in us to do the wrong rather than the right, the name that God gives to that apparently naturalness in us to do wrong rather than right, he calls 'the flesh'. And what that verse says so far is, "The law is weakened by the flesh, and it can't do anything about the flesh." And it really can't.

That's why many of us try to obey all that we're told to do. And we try to follow recommendations. And we try to follow regulations and do what the books say. And we cannot do it, because there's

something inside us called 'the flesh' that will not allow us to do it. Now 'the flesh' is that propensity to sin. The flesh is that tendency to do the wrong rather than the right. That's what God calls the flesh. It's that feeling that we were made to do wrong rather than to do right. That's what God calls 'the flesh'.

It's our perverted, twisted personality that prevents us obeying God's law. That's called 'the flesh'. It isn't the body. The body is okay. The body is good in God's eyes. The flesh is not the body. It's not in the sense that a medic would think of the flesh as being this part, or the part that gives us so much trouble before we finally get onto the right diet. It's not that flesh. 'The flesh' in the Bible is, that perverted old twisted personality that wants to do the wrong rather than the right. And it's that 'flesh' that wants to be satisfied with an outward show of obedience, really.

You remember the business about the Bible and the songbooks? Well the flesh actually wants us to be satisfied with that. The flesh doesn't want you to go into the attitudes and the motive life, because it knows, once you go into that, it itself has to cease to exist. So the flesh fights like mad. The flesh loves good sermons. Oh, it loves good sermons. The flesh just absorbs good sermons by the dozen and the book load. And the flesh loves to come to church, and loves to sing those songs, and those hymns. But the flesh hates anything that means that it itself is going to be destroyed.

The flesh in other words, can put on an outward show of obedience, loved ones. But at the level of the attitudes and the motives and the reactions, the flesh begins to show its hand. That's why the flesh never wants you to be concerned about anything deeper than outward obedience. That's why when you get to the level of anger and envy and jealousy and impurity; the flesh always says, "'Sinless perfection!' if you get rid of those." It always tries to label those things something that ought to mean that we wouldn't want it, because it wants to avoid that at all costs.

The flesh hates to hear anything that cuts at it itself. The flesh will often say -- and you know some of us have had this problem in our lives -- the flesh will often say, "Oh, it's the same old stuff all over again." Well the flesh will say that. Anything that cuts at the flesh itself, the flesh will designate by some label that will somehow extricate it from having to listen to it. The flesh will not and does not want to be destroyed.

Now loved ones, this is why God sent Jesus. God sent Jesus to destroy the flesh. Now, the flesh is not our bodies. It's not sex. It's not eating too much. It's not laziness -- all that stuff. The flesh is a personality that has become twisted and perverted and works the wrong way around.

For instance, God has a plan for each one of our lives. And God didn't just throw you in here to make the best of it. God knew when you were created. God knows what your abilities are. And it seems reasonable, doesn't it? The Creator has not left other things to chance, so he certainly would not leave you, the most complex part of his creation to chance. And he has a plan for each one of us here in this auditorium. He has a plan for your life. And all of his power is working to bring that plan about.

You remember Romans 8:28, "God works in everything for good to them that love him." So, different things are happening in your life. And God is working out, like a computer, a new method of bringing about his plan for your life. And you get off the track and he works to try to guide you around on to the track again.

So, God is working to get his way in your life, which is, of course, not only the best way for the purpose of his own universe, because it fits into it, but it's also the most fulfilling thing for all of us. See, your hair is just the right hair. That's right. For what God wants to do with you, your hair is just the right hair. Your legs, they're just the right legs. That's it. God didn't make a mistake. He didn't mess it up. He didn't program it the wrong way. God made you exactly right for what he wants for you. So, God has a certain way for your life and he is working on that all the time.

Now if we had accepted that, really life would just have flowed like life from his Holy Spirit continually. But we, ourselves, have often rejected that. In fact, many of us took a stand against it at a certain point in our lives. And we said, "No, we don't want your way. We want our own way."

Now loved ones what happens then is, you automatically fall under the influence of the next greatest power in your life. You can't do anything else. You would like to, but you can't. And the next greatest power in your life is your own body. That's why God calls this twisted old personality, 'the flesh', because it is a 'flesh dominated' personality.

So you end up trying to get your own way in relationship to your body. So your life becomes dominated by trying to get what your body needs, "Well, I need food and clothing and shelter. Okay, what job would give me the most money to get food, shelter and clothing?" And, "I like a certain kind of shelter. I'd like an apartment and... Oh yeah, so I have to get a certain amount of money to get that. And I don't like, you know, not expensive clothes but I like good clothes. And so I need to work out how do I get enough money to get that?" And then I marry and, "Well, she needs clothes, too. And then the children need clothes." And all our lives begin to be dominated by getting our way in relationship to our bodies. And so we become dedicated to getting food, shelter and clothing and the recognition that our bodies demand.

Now, that's the kind of twisted, perverted personality we have. So that our personality is working the wrong way around. It's working backwards. It was meant to work from God's angle and from the life of His Holy Spirit coming down to us. Instead of that, it works back from the world. We're always trying to get from the world, through our bodies, the things that we need. And our personalities are twisted and reversed the wrong way around. That's why we have a natural tendency to do the wrong thing, because we're dominated always by a different reason than God himself.

It's wee bit like taking a five-year-old and saying, "Okay would you drive my car home?" And the poor wee fellow sits there and looks through the steering wheel. And he is not fitted physically to do it. And mentally he doesn't know where you put that old gear stick. And he can't do it unless he is changed radically. Physically and mentally, he cannot drive your car home.

The same with us! You can't obey God unless you're changed radically, unless that old flesh thing inside you is destroyed. And that's what God did in Jesus. Our personalities find it natural to do wrong rather than right, because they are twisted and perverted, and have got into ruts over the years that only God can change. So you want to sit there and seek God's approval above everything else, but for years, you have been trying to get other people's approval, because you lack God's approval. And you suddenly try to change that.

It's impossible, loved ones. Your whole personality, for years, has been going in that direction. You cannot change it. You want to do God's will in the world, and you want to do what he wants you to do. But for years you've been doing what you wanted to do. You've been trying to make your way

through this dog-eat-dog world, and trying to manipulate other people in the way that you need, in order to survive, and suddenly you want to change and do God's will? It's impossible, because your whole personality is twisted the wrong way.

That's why what God did was put Jesus on the earth in the likeness of our sinful flesh -- not with a sinful flesh himself, but looking like us. And then he put our personalities, twisted and perverted as they are, into Jesus. And he destroyed them there. And he released us as new creations with personalities that point in the right direction. And he filled them with his Holy Spirit.

And that's what this verse says. Maybe you'd look at it. It's Roman's 8:3. "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh." He condemned that sin in the flesh to damnation.

Loved ones, you see what many of us are doing. We're saying, "Oh, you say we're to be loving and gentle and kind. Well, I am not loving and gentle and kind. You are driving me crazy by telling me I should be. I am doing the best, and I can't do it."

And what God is saying is, "I know that. You're trying to do a do-it-yourself job on the flesh. I destroyed the flesh in my Son Jesus. I want you to believe that and let my Holy Spirit begin to make that real for you."

We keep on saying, "But I can't! I can't! I can't love! I can't be pure! I can't be joyful! I can't be at peace!"

And God is saying, "I know. I know it. That's what I told you, you couldn't be. So, stop trying yourself. You can't be, because of your flesh, because your personality is twisted and perverted. Now believe me, I destroyed that in my Son Jesus. That's why I sent Jesus. Jesus didn't come to live and set you an example that would just exasperate you all the more, as you tried to follow it. Jesus was sent by me so that I could destroy that old flesh of yours in him, and enable you to be new people completely." And loved ones that's really what God did.

The only way to come into it, is to realize that you can't have a do-it-yourself job. The flesh can't destroy the flesh. All you can do is, come to the Father and say, "Father, I can't do anything about this. I do find it more natural to do wrong than to do right. I find I am almost built to lose my temper. Now, Lord, I believe what you say, that you in some kind of cosmic miracle have destroyed this old flesh of mine in Jesus. Father, I want to enter into that. I believe it was done. I believe, in my head, it was done. Now Lord, will you show me how to receive this in my own personality?"

And then, loved ones, begin to speak to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who will take the things of Jesus and make them real to you. And begin to speak to the Holy Spirit and say, "Holy Spirit, will you show me how to receive the benefits of this work? I am tired trying on my own. I am tired receiving Jesus just as the person who covered up my sins. I know that he came to destroy this heart of sin inside me. So Holy Spirit, will you show me how to enter into this? And I'll put myself at your disposal. And I'll start doing what you tell me to do."

Loved ones, that's the secret. Stop thrashing around in your own. Stop striving and condemning yourself. And start seeing that God sent Jesus to destroy that flesh in you that makes it so impossible for you to obey God.

But you can see the first step is to face it, loved ones. It's no use if you're going to keep on with this very sophisticated stuff, "Oh well, as long as I am outwardly like a Christian, that's all that matters". You won't get anywhere. Unless you start facing that or -- you remember -- who is the boy who wrote the novel 'Heart of darkness'? Yes, Conrad. And in 'Heart of darkness' you remember, traveling into that jungle and really, it's a whole slimily of the travel and the journey into the old self.

Loved ones, don't turn away from that 'heart of darkness'. Face the 'heart of darkness'. See that that's what God destroyed in Jesus. And he is not going to destroy it in you until you see the full glory of what he did. And to see the full glory, you have to see the miserable thing that he destroyed. And that involves listening to the Holy Spirit and saying, "Holy Spirit, why do I feel self-pity when everybody else is going out with their friends and I am not going out with mine? Why do I feel self-pity? Is it because I think I ought to have many friends? Is it because I think I ought to have many people looking to me and recognizing me and laughing with me? Is it because I think I have the right to more than Jesus had?"

Begin to deal with the Holy Spirit and let him show you. And then loved ones, the Holy Spirit will make it real. He will make it real. If anyone will see what God has done in Jesus to that old flesh and is willing to have it done in him, the Holy Spirit will fill you with himself. And then it's so good, so good to be a happy wallflower.

Oh, such a release to be able to see others happy and joyful even at your expense and to be just glad. Oh, it's so good. That's what God wants. Pray that -- this is 1975, you know, a new year. I really do pray that each of you will come clear -- will come into it, because that's that way God made us to live. Let us pray.

Father, we want to be like that. We want to be in the clearing with you. Lord, we want to be in those broad places. We want to be in that situation in regard to this old flesh -- that it is more natural to do good than to do bad. It's more natural to do what you want than to do what we want. Father, we believe that you can do a work in our hearts that will enable us to be like that.

Father, we thank You that You sent Jesus, not to tantalize us with an example of a holy life, but You sent Jesus to destroy in him, this old flesh that makes it so difficult to obey you. And Father, we thank you that we were destroyed with him. And this old perverted, twisted personality was turned the right way around when you destroyed Jesus for us. Father, thank you.

Holy Spirit, we would look to you this coming week and this year of 1975. We would ask you with all our hearts to bring us into this place so that we can be naturally joyful, obedient children of a loving Father. We ask this in Jesus name, for his sake. Amen.