

## Free and Accountable

Romans 9:19

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

If you leave your keys in the ignition of your car, and leave the car unattended, you deserve to be fined because you are putting temptation in the way of some young person who may steal your car and hurt himself or others. I want to point out two assumptions underlying that accepted axiom. I suspect it's the law, but whether it's the law or not I suspect it's the swinging liberal thing to say. I would like to point out two assumptions underlying it.

One is the assumption that stealing is not really so absolutely wrong. Whether that is really the assumption or not that is what comes over in that kind of attitude. What comes over to you is a general lack of emphasis on the wrongness of stealing, and a great emphasis on the foolishness or the irresponsibility of leaving your car keys in your ignition. Somehow the thief is encouraged to put the blame on the person who left the keys in the ignition. So whether you agree with the original axiom or not, I point out that from a practical point of view that is the effect that axiom has on us in society. We tend to feel that thou shall not steal is not as important and absolute as is the relative injunction thou shall not leave thy keys in the ignition in certain places and at certain times. I think that you'd agree that this axiom tends to take the emphasis off the absolute 'thou shalt not steal' and tends to put the emphasis, rightly or wrongly, on the relative 'thou shalt not leave thy keys in the ignition in certain places and at certain times.'

The second assumption and the second effect it has is that the stealer himself is encouraged to think of himself more and more as a poor little animal who like Pavlov's dogs is absolutely governed by reflex responses. So just as Pavlov presented the food before the dogs and they started to drool, the stealer is encouraged to think of himself as having all kinds of instincts and impulses that he can't possibly control. See the ignition key, foot on the pedal. It's just automatic. And he is encouraged to feel, 'I wish I could stop it but ignition keys, put the foot on accelerator'.

Somehow the dear soul is encouraged to feel that way about himself. Society is giving this type of direction to itself -- 'I can see that I'm just the hopeless victim of tremendous urges within me that I cannot possibly control', and he or she is encouraged to justify his or her irresponsibility. Whether you agree with the original axiom or not, that does tend to be the result of it. We tend to take the emphasis off absolutes. There is nothing that is absolutely right or absolutely wrong. There is nothing that is right at all times or wrong at all times; that are only relative values.

Secondly, we tend to encourage each other to believe that human beings are not free. That is, they are not free and they cannot be responsible. They are in some way under the control of tremendous forces that make it impossible for them to be responsible for their actions. I think that you'll agree with me that that kind of view has taken hold of our society. There are no absolutes -- no absolute right and no absolute wrong. Therefore we are not free to do what we want to do.

Now those were the two assumptions underlying the rejection of a local judge in Wisconsin by his community. You remember a couple of guys sexually assaulted a girl in the school corridor. The judge commented that the actions were justifiable considering the tremendous pressures that society puts on the male animal. The implication was that women are provoking men beyond anything they can control. Really, women should pity men because men are fully justified in violating women because

of the societal pressures placed on them. You remember the whole community reacted against the idea that the person who was raped was more responsible for the situation than the criminal who did the raping. The community rejected the judge's view.

Wouldn't you agree that underneath our whole legal system lie these two assumptions? Why that particular judgement and rejection in Wisconsin was noted in the newspapers was the same reason anything is put into the newspapers -- it is an exception to the rule. It is not the norm. Will you agree with me that underneath our whole legal system lies more and more these two assumptions? There is nothing absolutely right or absolutely wrong. Secondly, human beings cannot be absolutely free -- and be responsible and accountable for their actions. I think that makes many of us discontented and dissatisfied with our present society. We see these two creeping sicknesses -- these two heretical, invalid principles: that there is no absolute, and that people are not free to do what they want, and responsible for what they do. These two principles are tearing away the very fabric of our Western society. When we hear people such as Solzhenitsyn we know that they're extreme in one way and yet the brunt of their comments is correct. We feel our Western society is somehow becoming ragged at the edges because of these two attitudes.

Loved ones, I think the reason for them is found in our misunderstanding of the dear Person who created us. I really think it is. Our conceptions in this regard come from a misconception of our Creator. I will just point you to the verse today that we are studying that states that misconception. It is Romans 9:19: "You will say to me then, 'Why does he [God] still find fault? For who can resist his will?'" Or the way we put it is, 'If God made us capable of sinning and getting sick and put us in a world where little children can die of cancer and where millions of people can kill each other with bombs, then is God Himself not finally responsible for all this? Therefore is he not unfair in holding us accountable?' I would suspect that that has crossed most of our minds here. That problem in theology is called the problem of theodicy, the problem of a good God and an evil world. Most of us would state it that way, wouldn't we? If God has made us, if he has made us capable of sinning and getting sick and all the other things, and put us in a world where little babies can die of cancer and people can kill each other with bombs, then is God, who made all of this, not finally responsible for everything that takes place? Therefore, are we ourselves not free from accountability and is he not unfair to treat us a being responsible?

That is what we believe Romans 9:19 says. Why does God find fault with us because who of us can resist his will anyway? That is the problem of suffering. People say, "I would believe in God if it was not for the problem of suffering." That is really the problem with suffering. Now if I could share with you that I honestly don't think it is a problem. If you examine the purpose for which God made us. I would just ask you to think this through with me.

Why did God make us? It was not so that we could be little toys that he could play with or observe. It was not even so that we could be his agents to bring the universe into order. It was not that we could be the pitiful objects of his love so that he could save us. It was not any of those reasons. God made us to be his friends. That is it. You will find that in 1 John 1:3. "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." Fellowship is just another word for friendship. So that you might have friendship with us, be our friends, and we are friends of the Father and of his Son Jesus Christ. Now the purpose God made us for is so that we could love him, and he could love us. So that we could share our friendship with each other and have an understanding for each other.

That is why he made us in his own image. You remember in Genesis 1:26 God turned to Jesus, his Son and said, "Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness." Notice it does not say, 'Let me make man.' God did not make us because he needed friends. He and Jesus had a beautiful friendship and relationship of love. Yet he still made us to have friendship with him. He made us in his own image so that we could share in this friendship. You can only be friends with the same kind of personality and capacities as yourself. You know that. I don't know how many of you have pet dogs or pet cats, but you know you are kind of limited with the amount of friendship you can have with them. We are going for a walk so the old tail wags. Well, it is exciting but not deeply satisfying. Or you go for the ice cream scoop and the pooch's eyes light up and he knows you are getting ice cream. That is the kind of thing you can experience with a dog. But if you listen to Beethoven or you read Shakespeare's sonnets to him. It is amazing; he does not seem to be touched at all by it. When you try to share some of your own inner experiences he just goes to sleep. Obviously you cannot really have friendship with a being that does not have the same capacities as yourself. That is why God made us in his image, with the same capacities as he has.

Now those are in Genesis 2:7, "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Those of you who know a little Hebrew know that "ruah" is the word for breath and it is also the word for spirit. So God breathed in our bodies his Spirit. Then the Spirit combined with the body you see man became a living being. Again you would need a little Hebrew to know that "nephesh" is the word there used for living being and it actually means soul. So God made our bodies, breathed in his spirit and the result was our soul. The Greek word for soul is Psuche which is the part of us that we normally deal with in psychology, mind, emotions, and will. So God gave us the same capacities as he himself has, because his main purpose for making us was that we would be free. But he added one other capacity that was vital.

Let me point out to you that you could get any four of us together here with four other people. We all have minds and emotions and will; we all have spirits and souls, the same capacities, yet put eight of us in a room and we could be as distant from each other as if we were miles apart. You know that yourself, part of what makes us sense some love among us is not just that we have minds and emotions and will and spirits and bodies, there are 3 billion other people who have those, but it is because there is something else that makes us friends of one another. So, the capacities themselves will not make you friends because some of us use their minds to get their own way and their own wills in life. Some people use their minds to develop the world. Some people use their emotions to drain off other people's love. Some people use their emotions to give to others. Some people use their wills to try to make society better for others. Others use their will to get their own cause forwarded at all times.

It really does not matter so much about these capacities. The vital issue is how do you use them? Of course you are talking about something inside. What makes people friend friends is are they all loving people, are they all kind people, are they all patient people? You think of your friends. People who are your friends not only have these capacities but have a certain kind of character inside. There are attributes of character, qualities of personality such as love and joy and kindness and understanding that makes people friends.

Now, God did not give us those unconditionally. The other great capacity that he gave us that he has himself, was the freedom to be good or to be bad. In other words, he did not build into us love and kindness and patience. He in fact gave us these capacities and said, 'Look there is a spirit life that runs through me and my son Jesus, and that is what makes us understanding, patient, and kind.

Now if you want to be like us, and you want to share our friendship you must choose that for yourself. The greatest capacity that God gave us was free wills.

He is a self-determining being, therefore the people he could enjoy as friends had to be self-determining beings. That was the great capacity that made us capable for fulfilling the purpose for which God made us. He gave us free wills. He said, "Here you are, you can do what you like with the capacities I have given you. In the light of what you do with them we can be friends forever." Now do you see that, brothers and sisters, you need to see it plainly. You cannot make people your friends, they have to want to be your friends. God could have made us with these capacities and then preprogrammed into us love and kindness and patience and gentleness and understanding. Then we could not have been anything else but what he wanted us to be. Yet would we not have then been robots who imitated those virtues.

The very best we could have produced would be an animal like mute submission to each other, a passivity and indifference. But the only person who can love is a free person. That is the only person who can have the Spirit of Jesus, patience and kindness running through him, is the person who wants that. You know it yourselves. I have used the illustration before. I don't think I had any friends like this in Ireland but if I had ones who brought the old machine guns and bombs to my house and said I have an IRA man at each door, you cannot get out until you become my friends. Well, you know, we would stay here for years and years. You might pretend like mad but you would never become my friend through force and compulsion like that. It is vital to be free, otherwise friendship is not possible.

Do you see what you are then saying? God had to give us free wills. If we were ever to fulfill the purpose for which he made us, which was to be his friends, share with him, love him, and understand each other and enjoy each other's company, God had to make us free wills. Do you see that he had to keep his hands off every time a Hitler came forth, every time a Napoleon came forth, every time a Son of Sam, or a Boston Strangler came forth, every time somebody was cruel to their wife, every time somebody starved a child to death, do you see that God has to be consistent? He had to keep keeping his hands off. Do you see that if our dear Father came down onto this world, every time he saw something wrong and put it right, he would be in effect destroying free will? You may sit there and say, no brother I think he could have stopped the consequences of free will without cancelling out free will.

Well, you know he couldn't, you know we would always be looking up for this miraculous intervention every time something went wrong. You know we would have said to each other we're not really free, because he comes in every time something's not going according to his plan and makes it to go the way he wants? Do you see that God had to be consistent? Once he gave us free will, he had to let us either choose the Spirit of Jesus and spread the health and the love and the peace that that brings, or he had to let us choose our own wills and the Spirit of Satan and spread the anxiety and the fear and the hypertension and the ulcers that that brings. He had to let us do it. Loved ones, God gave us free wills because that's the only way he can possibly have any friends. And to do that he was prepared to risk even the death of his own Son, and the dreadful things that we see in our world. God could not make friends, he could only make people who would want to be friends or might not want to be friends.

Loved ones do you see where that leaves us with that verse. If you'd look at it, Romans 9:19, the second half of it. "For who can resist his will?" Anybody, anybody can resist his will. The whole of history is a testimony to that. In the garden of Eden he told us, "Don't eat of the knowledge of

good and evil." We ate of it. In the wilderness he said, "Don't worship the golden calf." The Israelites worshipped the golden calf. In Canaan he said "Don't worship the idols." They worshipped the idols. They did. Dear ones, the whole of this book is filled with instances of people resisting God's will. The whole book is a testimony to man's free will to do what he wants. The whole of our world is a testimony [history] to the same thing, "Who can resist God's will?" Don't let us be silly, don't play a whole lot of determinist games. You only have to look around us to see this isn't the kind of world God wants us to live in. This isn't the kind of world his Son wanted.

If you have any doubt about it, just ask yourself why did this world crucify the Son of the Creator? Surely if this world is what God wanted it to be, then when the Son came we would have welcomed him with joy and love, and make him King of the whole world. But we ground him into the ground because we were so different from him. Loved ones, who can resist God's will? Just look around us and we see people doing it every day. And then do you see the first part of the verse. It's important for us to stand up as men and woman adults face our responsibility. Romans 9:19. "You say to me then, why does he still find fault?" Because he knows we're free. He knows that even those of us who were born of drunken parents, the death of Jesus on Calvary counteracts the tremendous influences that that has on us in our own character. So that we have compensations of his grace to be truly free as the person who was born in a beautiful home and family where only Jesus' presence was thought of. God knows that through the death on Calvary, there is no human being that has a better chance of receiving him than any other human being. God finds fault with us loved ones because he knows we are free. We have free wills to do what we want and therefore we are accountable before him.

If you look back in Romans 2:4-13 and there God states it just very clearly through Paul. "Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."

So loved ones, why does he find fault? Who can resist his will? Everyone of us here in this room. There isn't one of us in this room, and I certainly am in the same boat, not one of us who haven't resisted his will at sometime or other. So let's not hide behind that. Let's see that God, in order to make us capable of his friendship, had to make us free and making a person does not make you responsible for their abuse of that freedom. Making a person free to choose his Spirit or to choose some other spirit doesn't make that person who made you responsible for your wrong choice.

Really, if you've had any difficulty with that concept maybe you'd look at it again and see that this dear Father of us is the one who has made it possible for us to see sunshine. You and I would never have been in existence but for him. It's him that has made it possible for us to see smiles, hear laughter and to see sunshine and warmth on our bodies. But in order to make that possible he had to make it possible also for us to see darkness and to sink into darkness ourselves. So would you step back from blaming your dear God and would you see that he has made you capable of his friendship? And that's beautiful. That our God actually wants us to be his friends and thinks so

much of us, and thinks so much of our freedom and responsibility that he has given us the capability of being his friends. So I ask you don't fall into that ungrateful, miserable, petty attitude -- why did you make me, why did you make me? Loved ones, don't be silly, you'd never have seen sunshine if he hadn't made you, you'd never have had the joys that you've had out of others friendship if he hadn't made you. Let's not blame him for the way we've abused our freedom. Let's stand up like men and women and choose the dear Spirit of his Son that he wants us to have. Let's exercise our free wills for him because it is true we are free and accountable and he thinks of us as such and will treat us as such at the end of this life.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we want to thank you for not making us sticks and stones. Thank you. We want to thank you for not making us creatures of instinct such as birds that have to go south in the winter and cannot do otherwise. We want to stand up and be real and honest and thank you for making us human beings -- people in your own image so that when Jesus, your Son, came to earth, he looked exactly like we do -- beings who have the same high and dignified opportunity and privilege as you yourself, that of free will.

Thank you, Lord. Father, we do not want to give that up, We do not want to pretend we do not have it. We are not going to say then, "Why do you then find fault? Who can resist his will? Lord, we know we can resist your will or we can accept it. You have every right to find fault with us if we reject the beauty you have put before us.

So, Lord, we would this very day react now against all weaknesses that have come into our wills Lord, I think particularly of loved ones who struggle with the silly little things. -- the little things that really aren't important like smoking and drinking, even masturbation and unclean thoughts. I pray for those of us who struggle with the big things, the jealousy, spiritual pride and conceit, critical spirit and sarcasm, and the indifference to your will for us. Lord I would pray for all of us who are struggling with these things and so far have been hampered by the sneaking suspicion that we are not really free and can't really help ourselves.

Lord, thank you for your clear message. We have both power and right to exercise our wills freely and to do what you want us to do. Thank you, Lord. Thank you for showing me that I can do what I want and have the power to do it and this moment I can turn from anything wrong in my life and obey you. Lord, I pray you will give that same confidence to each brother and sister here today and they will change their life accordingly this very moment by the grace that flows from Jesus on Calvary.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each of us. Amen.