

Hearing Christ Produces Faith or Sin

Romans 10:17

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We've been talking during these weeks about why we should tell other people about Jesus and particularly why we should tell people of other religions, like Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism, about Jesus. The first answer we shared was because other religions give only part of the truth about our Creator simply because their leaders are just ordinary men who are simply summarizing what God has revealed to the Jews about himself, whereas Jesus himself is the unique Son of our Creator.

So when we study his life, we see exactly what our Creator is like. That's the first answer we shared. The second answer concerns mankind's greatest problem: selfishness. His own perverted personality is so radically twisted that it needs to be remade. Other religious philosophers and leaders cannot do that. All they can do is modify man's selfishness, tamper with it a little, but only in Jesus, did our Creator remake our selfish personalities.

So Jesus does something that other religions cannot do; in him it is possible for our selfishness to be completely transformed and cleansed and changed. Other religions can simply tamper with it or modify it. It's as if mankind was chained to the wall of the dungeon of his own perverted selfishness and Buddha comes by and says, "Pretend the chains don't exist." That's really what Buddhism does. It says, "Negate the self. Pretend the self doesn't exist." So mankind tries to pretend that the chains don't exist.

Then Mohammad comes by and gives us a set of rules so that the hindrances of the chains are less obvious and less of a nuisance to us, so mankind tries to obey that set of rules. Long, long ago, the Hindus explained to mankind in his dungeon, "Your chains are caused by supernatural forces outside the dungeon. Now, try to please these supernatural forces and perhaps in the next life you'll be freed from the dungeon." And mankind has tried to believe that.

But do you see that all other religions leave mankind trying to believe or trying to obey? Jesus comes by, comes into the dungeon of our own selfish nature and takes the chains of our greed and our envy upon him and breaks them and then stands up and goes to the door and unlocks it, then sends his messengers to us to tell us, "Your chains are broken, stand up. The door is unlocked, come out." That's the vast difference, loved ones, between what Jesus has done for us and what other religious leaders have done, and that's why we need to tell the whole world about this Jesus, because in him something supernatural happened that has freed us from our own selfish sin.

What we shared last time was that there are only two responses to that command or that call. Either you believe that your chains are broken and the door is unlocked and you stand up and come out, or you don't believe it, in which case you disobey the command to come out and stand up and be free of self. So you can see that you either stand up and are free or you remain in the dungeon of self and remain imprisoned. But those are the only two responses.

That was emphasized in the verse we studied in Romans 10:16 in the RSV first edition. That verse uses the old English word "heed" instead of the word "obey." It has the same meaning but it's not as clear as the translation they have produced in the second edition, which is: "But they have not all obeyed the Gospel." Even though "heeded" is simply an older English word meaning the same thing

yet the Greek verb "Hupakouo" means "obey it". So it runs, "But they have not all obeyed the gospel; for Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" Do you see, loved ones, that Paul is taking Isaiah's statement, "Who has believed what he has heard from us", and is saying "Isaiah is saying very few have believed what they have heard from us" and then Paul interprets that as saying "they haven't obeyed."

So Paul, under God's inspiration, regards those who have not believed as people who have not obeyed -- and people who have not obeyed as people who have not believed. Of course you can see that back in the illustration; if a person doesn't get up and be free, then it surely must be because they haven't believed. In fact in Paul's words and in Jesus' words, there isn't the slimmest chink that you could get a razor blade into between believing and obeying, there isn't. But we in our 20th century language have tried to open a gap that we could drive a wagon and six horses through.

Loved ones, it just is not possible. The fact is, if you believe you obey and if you don't obey, it's because you haven't believed. Jesus is so strong on it himself, if you look at that famous chapter John 3:36. "He who believes in the son, has eternal life" and then he just switches the word around as if it's the same word exactly, "He who does not obey the son, shall not see life." You'd expect Jesus to hold to the same word, "He who believes in the son, has eternal life; he who does not believe the son, shall not see life", but Jesus switches the two words "believe" and "obey" as if they're both absolutely synonymous. In this dear, simple revelation of our Creator they are, but of course we are strange people. We somehow hate the idea of being labeled atheist. We hate anybody saying "Oh you don't believe, you don't believe." We hate the idea of being unbelievers or infidels. We'd rather say, "Well, we do believe but we do have a little trouble obeying at the moment -- but we're working on it."

Now, God's good word is so simple. He doesn't make that kind of distinction and don't you see it's true in the illustration? I know it's just an illustration, but the messengers outside the dungeon of self are saying, "The chains are broken, stand up. The door is unlocked, come out and be free." You either believe that the chains are broken and the door is unlocked and you come out and you live free from jealousy and envy and anger and pride -- or you believe that that's too radical a remedy and that it's not necessary and that in fact you can correct the things that are wrong in your life without being freed from that dungeon of selfishness.

Loved ones, it's that belief in self as God that the non-Christian religions appeal to and call for. Do you see that? Buddha, Mohammad, the Hindus, Confucius, Zoroaster are all saying to us, "Poor people, look, use your mind, try to believe with your mind, try to obey with your will. You can do it yourself. You can be freed from the things that spoil your life by yourself. Believe in yourself that you can do it on your own." It's really a kind of self-deliverance, a salvation by works, a feeling that, "If I keep sawing away on these old chains, I'll eventually get through them. Yeah, I hear you out there, I hear you. But I'm going to get through them myself. Yeah, you may say they're broken but I don't believe that. I'm going to saw away."

You either believe that they have been broken or you believe that you can break them yourself if you keep working at it long enough and loved ones, that's the flaw in all the non-Christian religions. They're really saying, "You or some other human being 'with a little help from your friends' can overcome this selfish nature that you have."

The truth is that it's impossible to do it. The selfish nature seems to get a stronger grip on you every time you operate in that way. But the worst of it is that actually even though it coats itself

as very godly behavior, it is downright atheism, it actually is. Because we're not fools; we don't refuse to believe in something unless we have some alternative that we can believe in.

So when we refuse to believe that the chains have broken and the door is unlocked by Jesus dying and us being crucified with him and being changed completely and renewed in his resurrection, when we say we don't believe that, it's because we believe in self. It's actually downright atheism, it's unbelief in God.

If you go back to the illustration in the dungeon, the dear soul sits there with the chains on his arms and the voice comes through, "Those chains have been broken; your old selfish nature was crucified with Christ. You can live free from what people think of you. You can live above what circumstances do to you. You can live without the satisfaction that the world can give you. You can live on God alone. You can do it." If that person believes the chains are broken then he stands up, if he doesn't believe, he sits there and says, "Well, I'm trying to get free of the chains, I'm trying to get free."

Loved ones, it's not logical. If he believes the chains are broken, he is free immediately. If he is still trying to get free, he doesn't believe the chains are broken. You know, the only reason I share this with you is that I think some of you are slaving under the old chains. I think some of you sit here Sunday after Sunday and you have trouble with that temper and anger and greed and envy and jealousy. You have trouble with jealousy and resentment against other people and a critical attitude towards your friends. You do. And you're trying continually to get free of those things and you're continually thinking, "Well I do believe all that Pastor says. I believe that my old self was crucified. I believe that, but I just can't make it work for me."

Loved ones, the truth is you don't really believe it, because you still think you can find a remedy yourself. You're still hoping that you can get rid of envy and jealousy and greed without leaving the dungeon of your own self-directed life. That's right. Really that's it and at the end of the day you know it. You want to be able to keep some chains on that you like; they look so nice. And you want to keep the door closed and locked when you want it closed and locked, because it keeps other people out and maintains your own privacy and your right to run your life as you want.

Really, the problem is with your belief, you know. You aren't willing to believe that you are free and you can live above self and you can live above self's concerns. The whole implication of our response to the gospel (because that's what the gospel is -- God's messengers outside the dungeon of self saying, "The chains are broken, you've been crucified with Christ. You can live above self.") -- the implications of our response to the gospel are made even clearer in today's verse in Romans 10:17. Now maybe you'd look at it and I'll show you what God has shown me through it.

"So faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." So the problem is real faith. Faith is belief plus obedience, belief plus action. Now how does that faith come? Well, it comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.

I would be prepared to bet, if I were allowed to bet, that almost all of us in this room at this moment, misinterpret the last part of that verse, really. See, the last part is, "What is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" and I'm sure that almost all of us think, "Oh yeah, that's it. This faith that you say comes so that I can be freed from self; this comes by hearing, by what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. That's why I am glad I come to this church because we have a preacher who preaches Christ and I know that some day as he is preaching

Christ, the truth is going to break upon me and I am going to see what faith is and that's why I pray for him that he'll preach it better and better every day so that some time it'll break upon me and I'll suddenly see what that faith is and I'll enter into it and I'll be freed from self."

Loved ones, here's the shocker: the word for preaching is a Greek word "Rhema." It's a word that can mean "word", but it means the actual word that is being spoken. It doesn't mean "preaching of Christ" in the sense of preaching about Christ, it means that what is heard comes by the actual speaking of Christ. What is heard comes by Christ's preaching.

In other words, the verse is saying, "Faith -- the belief and the action that frees you from self -- comes from hearing Christ speaking to you personally." That's the meaning of the verse and you'll see it more clearly if you ask yourself, "how do I know when Christ is speaking to me personally?" You know fine well. Every one of us in this room could probably answer that the same way. You know there are moments in a sermon when the preacher fades into the background and his limited knowledge of you and your life seems to die away and there comes into the forefront of your experience as you're sitting there, a sudden realization that God is speaking to you about things in your life and things in your heart that only he can know and no preacher can know them. You know there are moments like that.

There are moments when you realize, "He can't know that because he doesn't know me. This is some voice bigger and better and more intelligent than his that is revealing to me the very things that are in my life."

Loved ones, at that moment you are hearing the preaching of Christ. That is, Jesus himself is saying to you, "The abandonment that I felt on Calvary when I cried, 'My God My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me' was because I took you, your God-like self that wants so much authority over its own life, with all its fear of men and its fear of circumstances and its slavery to things and its irritability with men and its irritability with circumstances and its irritability with things and I allowed those to be destroyed in me by my Father's wrath. And when I cried, 'My God my God why hast Thou forsaken me' it was because I took all of you and your selfish perverted nature into me and allowed it to be destroyed in me and when I rose from being dead, I recreated your personality anew. Now that's a fact. Now be free."

And loved ones, when you say, "I'll wait until a more convenient season", then Jesus says, "You mean you don't believe what I have said to you, because you believe in yourself and you believe that somehow you're going to deliver yourself from this mess your life is in and I tell you, you cannot. That's why I died and yet despite the event of my death and my personal words to you here this morning, you refuse to believe me." Then he says, "My word shall not return unto me void, it will accomplish the purpose for which it is sent and in your heart this morning, it finds a belief and obedience or it finds unbelief and disobedience."

All men who have ever tried to talk about God to their brothers and sisters have found that that's the greatest moment in preaching; when you and I cease to be involved in a human dialogue and it ceases to be you listening to my theories or my ideas and it becomes you listening to Jesus, with the holes in his hands and the hole in his side, saying, "I died and you died with me. Now if you're willing to believe that and live like that, stand up and live above self this very moment." All of us have found that, loved ones.

Luther ended a sermon like this and it's the way I would end this one, "On the last day, God will

say to me, 'Has thou also preached that?' I shall say, Yes, exactly. Then God will say to thee, 'Has thou also heard that?' and I shall answer, yes. And he will say further, 'Why hast thou then not believed' and then I'll sayest, 'Oh, I held it for a word of man, since a poor chaplain or village parson uttered it.'

'So shall the same word, which sticketh in thine heart, accuse thee and be thine accuser and judge at the last day, for it is God's word. It is God himself thou has heard. As Christ sayeth, 'He that heareth you, heareth me and I have sufficiently done mine office for the tribunal and presence of God in that I have shown up thy sins and offenses and chastised thee. Therefore I am pure of thy blood. See thou then to it, how thou standest.'" Even though it is not popular in our day that is the true situation loved ones; "See thou then to it, how thou standest."

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank you for the clarity of the illustration that you've given us with the dungeon. It's so plain to us that if the man really believes, then he'll have done with his chains in his dungeon and the selfishness and he'll stand up and walk, however many times he falls, he'll walk. However many times he may think the chains are around him again or the door has been locked again, he'll keep shaking them off and keep opening the door and he'll live above self because he believes that you have destroyed the fetters yourself and the powers of our selfish nature on Calvary.

Lord, thank you that if we will only believe that and stand up and walk, we'll find that our ankle bones will have grown strong and that our legs will hold us up as the lame man found when you said to him, "Stand and be healed." Lord, I pray that some loved one here may stand up and begin to walk above self and above self's concerns and begin to live as the new person that you have made them in yourself. We would pray this for each other for your glory.

The grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.