

Sin Blinds

Romans 11:8

Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Beginning the fall quarter reminds me of my first quarter at seminary. I remember coming home and looking forward to sharing with my dearest friend, my father, all the deep insights that I had got in pastoral psychology. I remember our conversation around Christmas time how I analyzed for him his relationship with my mother, appropriately bringing in the Oedipus complex and the Freudian theory of the unconscious. And I remember how those dear, loving eyes patiently looked on and listened. Then at the end he said, "Yes, that is good. But I think what we need to do is just love your mother so that she knows that we love her."

I think probably you have experience the same thing -- those kind of touching, pathetic encounters with our moms and dads or older people -- when we decide to share the deep intellectual insights that we have got at college. We begin to share them so that we will at last put right all the difficulties that they have had in the family for years and years. Then you see all the love and the patience of the ages coming from their eyes. You realize years later that you blew it completely. It was utterly irrelevant!

The truth is that our knowledge was probably beyond our parents' knowledge. Often our knowledge is actually beyond their knowledge. My dad worked in the shipyard as an electrician and hadn't done pastoral psychology, and I'm sure that my knowledge was way beyond his. But our understanding was way behind their understanding. Our knowledge was way out there ahead of theirs -- but our understanding was way back in the times of Neanderthal man.

Really, our mistake is that we think it's a concept problem, and in fact it's a people problem. Relationships concern people. Relationship problems are people problems. They aren't concept problems. They aren't theory problems. They aren't idea problems. The difficulties we meet with in our relationships with each other are not going to be solved by relating this concept rightly to that concept -- but by relating this person rightly to that person. What we need more and more is an honesty in dealing with each other in our families and our homes.

Of course, if we don't have that honesty, and if we don't really relate to each other as people, and try to relate to each other through all kinds of theories and academic ideas, we will be missing each other. We will be attempting to meet each other, but will be passing each other all the time. We will really be dealing with irrelevant issues. In fact, what happens when we do that is that we get harder and harder in our relationships with each other.

Many of us have done that at home. We've wondered why our dad or mom seems further from us now that we are at college, now we have been away, or now that we've got all this deep theological insight into things. And the truth is that we are trying to deal with them through a whole lot of ideas and theories, instead of trying to deal with them as people.

Last Sunday we talked about the same problem in terms of the close relationships that we have with our roommates or with our husbands or our wives. We took the example that some of us treat our roommates or our friends or our wives or husbands in an offhand manner. We take them for granted, and we treat them in kind of a taken-for-granted manner. There's an offhand tone in our voice, and

that makes them feel distant from us. Then they begin to get quiet and resentful, and they begin to withdraw from us and be reserved.

Then we wonder, "What's wrong?" And then we do the same thing as we do when we come home and express to our dad all our latest ideas in psychology. We have a list of things that we think ought to make them happy. So we buy them flowers, and they're still not happy! Then we take them out to dinner, and they're still not happy! Then we clean the apartment, and they're still not happy! Then we go to the trouble of making the meals, so that they come home from work and it's ready for them -- and they're still not happy. We wonder what on earth we have to do to make these people right with us!

Of course, what we have to do is ask them in what way we are hurting them -- and then stop doing that. It doesn't matter how many other things we do, or how many other things we stop doing -- many of which may be annoying to them, and many of which may spoil the relationship with them. But what we need to deal with is the ONE thing -- and it's usually one thing in particular -- that makes them feel that we don't trust them or we don't love them.

Of course when we don't deal with that thing, what happens is our hearts grow harder towards each other. It doesn't matter whether it's roommates, or whether it's husband and wife. You lose something sensitive in the air, don't you? There's a coldness that comes into the apartment. There is a hardness -- a standoffishness that comes into the marriage. There's a tendency in which we begin to walk round each other instead of dealing with the thing that hurts the other person. And, of course, that's the only way to a right relationship.

Now, loved ones, that is a law that God has built into life -- the law that if we don't deal honestly with each other, a hardness will come into our relationship with each other. That's a law of God! If we don't deal honestly with each other, if we don't listen to what the other person is saying, then our psychological beings are so created by God that there comes a hardness into our attitude to each other.

You know what I mean. You want to be close to the person -- you want to reach over all that stuff. You want to draw them to you. But somehow you can't. That's a law of God. He has made us that way. He has so made us according to the standards that he has outlined himself down through the centuries, that if we don't respond to each others' cries and pleas for help -- if we don't respond to the things that other people feel hurt us in them -- then our sensibilities and our consciences become harder and harder.

That's the truth that God sets forth in this verse that we are studying. Romans 11:8: "As it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day.'" Now that doesn't mean that God looks over us all, and he decides, "I'll give a spirit of stupor to you. I'll give a spirit of sensitivity to you. I'll give a spirit of stupor and hardness to you." That's not it. God gives a spirit of stupor to those who will not respond to the things that he is telling them about in their consciences that hurt him and express distrust of him.

You can see that if you look back to Romans 10:21: "But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'" Now it not because of individual Israelites -- but Israel as a nation was continually ignoring what God was telling them in their consciences was hurting him, and were disobeying it, and were being contrary and were resisting him. So he gave THEM a spirit of stupor -- eyes that should not see, and ears that should not hear.

In other words, it's God's way of saying, "I have so made you, loved ones, that if you're disobedient to me, if in your friendship with me you don't listen to me, if in your friendship with me you keep on doing all kinds of things that destroy my world and make a mess of what I love -- then there will come into your conscience a hardness towards me, and you'll have difficulty in feeling any sensitivity or tenderness towards me."

And what is true of our relationship with God is true of ourselves. In our own friendships, God has so made us, that if you aren't absolutely honest with your friends or with your loved one at home -- and don't respond to what hurts them in your action -- then you are so made that you'll lose the tenderness and closeness to them and the warmth of friendship, and you'll get hard and cold, so that it will be difficult for you even to remember what a trusting friendship is like.

The reason God has so made us that way is to save us from becoming hypocritical monstrosities. God has made us so that love is the key to knowledge; so that behavior is the key to deep friendships; so that the exercise of the will is the key to close empathy between two people. God has so made us that way to prevent us from becoming hypocritical monstrosities.

We have a great example of the old hypocritical monstrosity in our society. I'm sure sensitivity groups are good for something. But they're not good as an expression of real friendship. A sensitivity group is one of those psychological therapy groups that maybe encourage some people to be open in some way, but the one thing they do not deal with is real friendship.

That's the kind of situation where, "We're all here together to be honest with each other. And I want you to tell me what you really feel towards me. OK?" "Well, Ernest, my feelings towards you are kind of ambivalent. I feel on the one hand, that in a way, you don't treat me as a person. You don't respond to me as a person. In fact, I think you're reacting to something in your past. That's it! But I could say that there is one attitude in me and feeling in me toward you that I would say is pretty consistent and pretty recurring every time I see you. And I could maybe put it in just perhaps three words. I feel toward you a vehement, seething hatred!" (Laughter from the audience.) And then I'm supposed to come back and say, "Well, I can quite understand that! But I know you really love me, deep down." (Laughter)

And you know that all of us feel that kind of group may be useful for to help loved ones to be more open generally, but the one thing it doesn't do is, it doesn't establish deep friendships of trust at all. And you know why! You know if you've taken part in that kind of group, that you feel, "Well, maybe you're being honest. But I don't see how you can be my friend if you hate me! And I don't see how you can feel that I can trust you if you really hate me like that!"

We have the feeling that friendship concerns a person's will towards you. If a person wills hatred toward you, then you feel, "Hatred is under your control! You can will not to hate me." But if you're sitting there and someone says to you, "I feel towards you a vehement seething hatred," you kind of have the feeling, "Well, you must will that towards me. You must will evil towards me. I can't feel any tenderness or closeness to you if that's the case."

And really, loved ones, God has so made us that we can only feel tenderness and sympathy and friendship and closeness to someone who wills towards us good, and wants the best for us. We can only feel closeness to a person if they behave to us in a kindly way, according to the standards that God has set forth to us so clearly. To people who try to be honest about their feelings towards

us but who obviously don't want good for us, we have to feel a distance and a hostility.

This was the kind of game that the Jews played with God. Our dear Creator chose the Jews as the first human beings to whom he would make real his friendship. He explained to them, "Look, I'll give you all the material needs that you need and I'll give you my love and my friendship, so that you'll never have any trouble with knowing who you are or why you're here, as long as you trust me. As long as you listen to what I say to you, day by day, as long as you follow out the plans that I have for your life, I'll be right with you all the way. I'll be a loving and a kind Father to you who will provide you with all that you need."

Of course, the Jews, you know, took that special position that God had given them and they decided that they were not only going to protect it themselves (because at times they didn't like the way he was protecting it), but they were going to advance it for themselves by their own power and in their own way. So they stopped trusting God.

Of course, God gave them an extra guard. He said, "Listen, you'll know you've stopped trusting me and you've stopped being real with me if you ever do these kinds of things: If you ever find yourself stealing, you'll know you don't trust me for your material possessions. If you ever start bearing false witness against your neighbor, you'll know that you really don't trust me for your reputation. If you ever find yourselves coveting, you'll know that you don't trust me for your possessions."

But you know what they did. Instead of taking those dear laws as indicators of their trust or distrust of God -- they made those laws a series of moral guidelines. And they began to confuse sin -- which is distrust and independence of God -- with immorality. They began to say, "Well listen! God obviously wants us not to covet -- wants us not to steal. We better not do that. That'll please him. We'd better not bear false witness, because that'll please him, because he said we shouldn't do that. We'd better not kill. That'll please him. But meanwhile, we'll go on living our own lives in our own way, trusting our own guidance and our own power."

And so the Jews fell into the same pattern as those of us who bring flowers home to a wife that actually is hurt by our off-hand tone of voice. That's what they did. They started to try to follow moral guidelines, thinking, "That'll please him!" Well, that wasn't what the laws were meant for in the first place at all. The laws were there as indicators that they weren't trusting him and that they weren't loving him. But they worked out, "Oh, no! If we do these things, he'll be kind of pleased with us, and meanwhile we can get on with our own lives, and ignore the little troubles and the little conscience pricks that we feel, and we'll just do these things."

And so what happened to the Jews was that they hardened in their relationship with God. Their relationship with God became a long series of legal acts that they thought would please him, and it lost all the sensitivity of a close friendship where they knew what he was saying to them and they responded to it.

Now, loved ones, you see it's the same with us. See that many of us want to know God. And that's what God wanted for the Jews. Repeatedly he said to them, "Listen, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. I don't want all these games you're playing with the law. I desire mercy. I desire a real tender heart like mine within you. I desire a knowledge of God, and not sacrifice and burnt offerings. I want you to know me. I don't want you to be playing all these games with burnt offerings to make up for the times when you fall in immorality. I want you to know me, myself."

And many of us say, "Yes, that's what we want, too. We want a knowledge of God. We want to know God for ourselves. We want him to be real to us."

But you know what we do. We play games with him. We bring him flowers. We take him out to dinner. We make him a special meal. We do all kinds of things that we've learned in pastoral psychology or in our philosophy classes. We do all the things that we've learned at Bill Gothard Basic Youth Conflicts talks, or that we've learned at our church, or that we've learned from the speaker Francis Schaeffer, or that we've learned from reading books.

We'll play all kinds of games. We'll go to church thinking it will please God or read the Bible thinking it will please God. We do all kinds of things that are good, but they are games. They're bringing flowers to a loved one who really wants you to look at her and treat her as a person. They're cleaning the apartment once for a roommate who really doesn't think you care about them at all because you never talk with them. It's doing things that are irrelevant.

What happens is, God gives you a spirit of stupor. The Greek word means "a stunning" -- katanuxeos. It's a stunning. It means to strike so that you stun a person, so that they're reeling back and can't quite see things right. And isn't that what many of us feel like? We feel like that man who was blind and was touched by Jesus. Jesus said, "What do you see?" and the man said, "I see men, but I see them as trees walking. I can only see vaguely. I can't distinguish between the trees and the men. I can't see their faces."

And many of us are like that. We feel we're almost in touch with God but not quite. We almost sense him, but not quite. There is a lack of tender closeness towards him. We desperately want it, and we don't understand why we aren't getting it. We are doing all these good things. We are trying to obey all these laws of morality, all these laws of religiosity, but somehow God is still not real to us.

It's dead simple, loved ones. God has been speaking to your conscience for a long time about little things that you do day-by-day that show that you don't trust him -- and he wants you to stop doing those things. When you stop doing those things, he'll stop allowing a spirit of stupor to come upon you, so that your eyes cannot see and your ears cannot hear. He will give life to your eyes and ears, so that you see him and you begin to hear his voice.

It's so simple what we have to do. We have to start living with God as a person. Isn't that what kills us with our friends -- when they treat us as things? Isn't that the agony? I know in marriage, that's the agony -- husbands and wives -- when you no longer deal with each other as living persons, but you've listed each others' responses so that you're just a bundle of responses to each other, and you just take it for granted you know how she'll behave, or you know how he'll behave. You no longer treat each other as living people.

It's the same way with us and our moms and dads. We kind of put each other into categories and boxes, so that we don't respond to each other as real living people.

Now, loved ones, while we treat our God like that, he will allow a spirit of stupor -- a spirit of stunning and blindness -- to come upon us. There will always be a cloud between him and us. Why? Because he is pushing us away? No -- because we are pushing him away. We're saying, "No. We're doing all these good things. You ought to come close to us. But these little pricks we're feeling in our conscience, these little things we feel we should stop doing that you have told us about so often.

No. We're not stopping those." Of course, the fact is, those are the sin.

You can be engaged in all kinds of things that people call immorality, and they're wrong! I don't think we should do them. They're wrong. But you can be engaged in all kinds of immorality, but God may be speaking to you about something nobody else regards as wrong at all. But that's how he's going to establish a personal relationship with you that he has with nobody else.

So, loved ones, that's the key. The key to close, honest, loving friendships is dealing with each other honestly, adapting our behavior and changing it so that it is good for the other person, changing our will so that we deal differently with them and speak differently with them. That's the key to ordinary friendship.

It's also the key to our relationship to our Maker. We've to live day by day by our intuition, not by this list of bringing flowers, and taking people out to dinner, and all the things that the psychologists recommend for good relationships. Not to play that game with God. Not even to play that game with each other. But to meet each other honestly with our intuition telling us what to do.

You know that God has given us intuition. You know the things in you that hurt somebody else. You know fine well the things in you that are hurting God. And the key is – stop those. Just stop sinning. That's what sin is. All the other things are immorality, but sin is whatever distrust or disobedience in you is crossing God at this moment. Stop that, and you will find a flow of life coming into you that enables you to sense God as a close and dear Father who loves you and cares for you. And it will work, loved ones, because that's a law of God that he has built into us.

So, what you need to do now is listen to your conscience and stop whatever your conscience has been telling you is wrong. Stop it now. Then continue to do that day by day. And you'll find a closeness developing between you and your dear Father that will give you eyes that can see and ears that can hear.

Let's pray. Dear Father, we see the games that we play with our loved ones, with our roommates, and with our colleagues. How we're dealing with everything but what matters. What their hearts are hurt by in our lives. That's what matters. Oh Father, we ask for sensitivity to see that in our loved ones and our friends, so that we can put things right there. But most of all Lord, what are we doing that offends you? Will you show us that, Father?

And Lord, we want to be close to you, and we want you to be real to us, so we will stop that thing, whatever it is, and whatever it costs us. And however uncertain we may be because of all kinds of things other people say, Lord what counts is what your Holy Spirit has convicted us of in our consciences. Lord, we commit ourselves to stopping that thing this day, this very moment.

Now Father, we pray that our prayers from now will be filled with a sense of your being able to hear us, because we're praying according to your will, and we're living according to your will for us.

So Lord, we would do that now, and ask you Lord Jesus, to come back into our hearts and our lives, and we ask you to keep the promise that you made, that your Father would love us, and you would love us, and you would make your home in our hearts. We ask you to do that now, that we may experience again the relationship with you that we know is your will for us. We give ourselves to you now, from this day forward, to be sensitive to what our conscience tells us and to be tender towards you and each other -- for your glory. Amen.

