

## No Man is an Island

Romans 14:1

by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Many of us here remember when we first realized that Jesus was alive and that you could know him personally -- even though he was the son of the Creator, you could know him as a real friend. And many of us remember going home and telling our parents all about what we had discovered and, of course, trying to convert our father and our mother right on the spot.

Most of us remember too, not only telling them about Jesus but telling them about the Campus Church song book and about Watchman Nee and about all the other things that were absolutely essential in order to get to heaven. What we in fact found ourselves doing, of course, was telling them about a lot of things that weren't essential at all, and that weren't important. They were just things that we, as a group, had as attitudes -- they weren't essential. Jesus alone was essential.

And yet there are so many of those things loved ones, that we get distracted by. Even our idea of doing business and using business here and abroad to express Jesus' love and care to other people, that's really non-essential; it's just something that God has led us into, but it's not an essential.

So for many of us who are experiencing community living, it's not an essential, it's just one of the things that God has led some of us to and there are many of these non-essentials in the Christian life. But many of us are misled into thinking they're essentials so we get caught up with all kinds of views and attitudes and practices that we think are part of being in Jesus and they aren't -- they aren't vital at all.

We get caught up as we've often said, in certain attitudes to state's rights that we think everybody who is a Christian ought to have, or a certain attitude to war, or a certain attitude to nuclear disarmament, or a certain attitude to abortion, or a certain attitude to euthanasia. And before you know it, we lose all the freshness and the simplicity of our love for Jesus as it gets buried under this mass of legalistic obligations and attitudes that we begin to get preoccupied with. That is what God is speaking to us about in these first verses of Romans 14.

He is really saying, "When somebody who is weak or young in the faith comes into your group and gets all preoccupied with these non-essentials and gets all pre-occupied with the do's and don'ts of Christianity, don't you, who are a bit stronger in faith, start showing your great superior spiritual knowledge by arguing with them about those things. Don't do that, because by doing that, you yourself are eating again of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and that's not the problem of mankind."

"Mankind's problem is not, knowing what is good and what is evil -- he knows that. Man's problem is doing what God has told him, personally, to do and being interested in that. So God has been saying to us these past few Sundays "Don't get caught up with what is the right attitude to euthanasia, what is the right attitude to state's rights, what is the right attitude to this and to that. Don't do that. That's not the essential thing."

There is one essential and what Paul does is bring us back down to that one essential. He says the

one essential is what God is personally telling you to do in your life. What attitudes and what things is he guiding you, personally, to do and to take and to think? That's what's important.

That's what sin is: sin is not doing that. Sin isn't so much the euthanasia. Sin isn't so much killing people. Sin is losing that sensitive relationship to your Creator by which he tells you what he wants you, personally, to do. That's the heart of these verses, so maybe you'd look at them in Romans 14:1-7, "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand.

One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself."

That's the verse we're studying: "None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself." Of course, what Paul is really saying is that it's not what these people are doing or what these people say is right, it's what God is telling you to do, that's what you've to be concerned about. You may remember a quotation I once shared months ago that came from Bismarck. If you know anything about European history, Bismarck was one of the most stubborn and willful and militaristic leaders that Germany ever had, and he virtually ruled Germany at one of its greatest periods as a nation.

Bismarck is a man you would think is like a Sherman tank: he'd just go through anything! In pictures of him, he looks the consummate militaristic dictator and yet it's very interesting, one of the things he said. He said, "Statesmen are not men who move nations and who control history. Big things like that are not in the hands of puny men with weak wills; big things like that are in the hands of a higher providence than statesmen. Statesmen (and he was hoping that he would be such a one) are men who listen for the footsteps of God." And if you knew Bismarck, you would think he is the last one to say that! Yet all of us here who have seen the formation of Israel, all of us here who have seen things happen in the world in the Second World War and the First World War, you have sensed that haven't you? Things are not really in our hands.

There is a mighty, providential God that is moving powerfully in the midst of history and those who are sensible and who want to survive in this world will listen for the footsteps of God. They'll watch to read what way God is moving. Loved ones, that's what Paul is saying we need to do in our own lives.

You need to start listening for the footsteps of God in your life. You need to stop this business of saying, "I am going to do this and I am going to do that." You're not doing anything that he does not permit you to do; you're not. You've seen it. You've seen yourself break repeatedly, and things that you were determined to do -- everything looked good, and it didn't work out.

If you're going to go anywhere with your own life, you're going to have to start listening for the footsteps of God. Not just reading circumstances; circumstances can come from Satan or from other people but listening for God's footsteps, listening to him and beginning to sense, "Lord God, which way are you moving with me? What do you want to do with this life of mine?"

Now, if you asked me what prevents us doing that? What prevents us walking in that kind of liberty -- because it would be liberty -- it would be great liberty to walk to one drummer, especially if he beats a rhythm that is just right for my life and nobody else's. It would be much easier to go to the beat of one drummer than the way I go at present; listening to half a dozen drummers. Now what prevents me living in that kind of liberty where I would just listen for one person's footsteps to see what I should do with my life?"

The thing that prevents us is an attitude that is built deep into our present day society and it's an attitude, actually, that comes out in the normal misinterpretation of this verse that we're studying. You remember this verse is, "None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself."

Now what do you think is the normal misinterpretation of that in our society or the normal interpretation? "None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself." It's the one that Simon and Garfunkel used in their song. It's the one that hundreds of song-writers use and it comes from this old quotation that was written in the 17th century. You'll recognize it immediately, and this is the attitude that prevents, probably most of us here, from walking after the footsteps of God -- it's the interpretation of this verse, "No man is an island entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. As well as if a promontory were. As well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." [John Donne].

That's the way we all interpret that verse. We say, "That's exactly right. No man lives to himself, no man dies to himself because we're all part of each other and we're all part of mankind and that's why we're all one." And you know the next step? The next step is, "Therefore it's very important to me, what you think. It's very important to me what you think of me. I am part of you and you're part of me, so what do you think -- what do you think I should do?" That's the disease of our society.

I don't know that there's one of us here that hasn't had trouble with that very thing; "What do people think of me? What do people think I should do? What does the boss think of me? What do my friends think of me? Listen, what do you think I should do with my life?" Isn't it true that we get that from this whole interpretation; we say no man dies to himself, no man lives to himself, that's dead right because we're all part of each other. No man is an island; we all belong to each other and therefore it's very important what we think and it's very important what others think of us and it's very important what you think I should do. So let's just be all open with each other and let me run my life according to the way you think I should run it."

Isn't it true that thousands of others in our society are living their lives like that? Is that not the reason why we have so few strong leaders? We have so few strong leaders because the leaders are always looking behind them to see if the other guys are following or if they agree with them, and so we don't turn out strong leaders today; we turn out people who are filled with man-fear and what they are filled with, we are filled with.

We are so often preoccupied with what other people think we should do and that's what prevents us living our lives listening for the footsteps of God. We are all preoccupied with listening for all your little footsteps. We're all preoccupied with, "What does my dad think I should do, what do my friends think I should do, what does my boss think I should do, what do my neighbors think I should do", and so there's so much static inside the old system coming through your antenna that God can't

get his clear voice in at all. So you rarely listen for the footsteps of God.

You don't need to; your ears are filled with the footsteps of everybody else. In fact, isn't that why you're often confused at times? You often say, "Oh, I don't know what I should do because John says I should do that, my dad says I should do that and somebody...." It's terrible! There's no peace, and no singleness of mind, because we think that that's what that verse means; "No one lives to himself and no one dies to himself. No man is an island because we're all part of each other and therefore it's very important what everybody thinks."

In other words, we have taken "mankind society" and we have raised him up and made him an idol and we have brushed God off the stand. And the God we listen to is society, and each other, and our friends, and everybody else. We do it because we think, "But isn't that what that means --no man is an island. I mean we are not on our own, are we?"

No; that's a blasphemous misinterpretation of that verse, "No man lives to himself and no man dies to himself." Loved ones, do you know that the dear guy who wrote that original quotation that I read was not a secular humanist at all. "No man is an island, entire of it's self. Each man's death diminishes me. Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

He wasn't a secular humanist; he is John Donne, an English writer and poet who was an Anglican minister in the 17th century. And that is the last part of Meditation 17, which is a devotional that he wrote in his devotions one day and the devotion begins and forms the real basis for that like this, and you see what he really meant when he said that.

"Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill" he himself was ill at this time, "as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that." And he meant "Maybe I am so sick, I am dying, and it's actually tolling for me."

"The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me; all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all."

No man lives to himself and no man dies to himself because we are all part of the mainland, which is God in his son Jesus. That's the sense in which no man lives to himself, or no man dies to himself; we are secondarily part of each other, but only because we are part of God and part of Jesus.

It's in that sense, loved ones that your life is not in your own hands. You can't just say, "I am fed up with it; I am going to take an overdose and end it." You haven't that right. You are not your own; you've been bought with a price; you are part of God, you are part of Jesus.

If you say to me, "I don't care about God, I don't care about Jesus; I swear at them everyday -- I

don't like them. I don't believe in it." You are still part of their life. The very life that makes your heart beat cannot be explained by any doctor or specialist however clever; none of them can explain why the heart beats. That heart beat depends on the flame of life that exists in one place in the universe: that is in Jesus.

You live, whether you like it or not, by the very life of Jesus. It is his flame of life that enables your mind to keep thinking. You are only alive today because he has continued to pass that life to you. You say to me, "So that I could blaspheme him; so that I could tear him apart and be sarcastic?" Yes, that's how much he loves, yes. He was even giving life to the Roman soldiers who were at that very moment putting a spear into his side.

The life that you have is part of God's own life, and so you are part of Jesus, and you're part of God. No man lives to himself, no man dies to himself. When you die, a part of God goes; a part of Jesus is hurt. You are not just your own; because of that, you're part of the rest of us. But first, because you're part of him.

You'll see it very plainly if I ask you what trouble you get into if the stomach bypasses the head and just deals directly with the mouth and you eat lollapalooza after lollapalooza? [an enormous ice-cream sweet] It is absolute chaos -- and that's how we get into chaos; the stomach doesn't bother going through the head but goes right to the mouth and the mouth gobbles like mad, and it doesn't work -- the body gets lopsided. The body goes out of sync and it's hopeless. The hand cannot get that food to lift without going through the head, and it's so with us; the only way in which we can be part of each other is first by listening to the head. The way you can best fit into society is by listening to the head, listening for the footsteps of God. He knows where you fit into his plan and he'll fit you into society.

The Minnesota Multiphasic test and the vocational guidance tests are second best; they're a way to keep society hobbling along as long as it refuses to listen to the head that made it.

The other way to find out where you fit into society, and the way to begin to march in step with the rest of us, is to take your eyes off the rest of us and to begin to listen for the footsteps of God. Could I point you to one last verse, an incredible verse, if I explain to you the right translation of it? It's John 1:4. I checked it again in the Greek just to be absolutely certain that the footnote was right; it looks harmless enough and looks the way we've always read it.

John 1:4, "In him was life and the life was the light of men." Then you see the little footnote: it says, "or was not anything made." And then a period and then the new sentence, "That which has been made was life in him." And it's right; the Greek says that 'ho egan ato'; "that which has been made was life in him." Your heart beats because that heart was life in him and it's his life that keeps it beating. Your mind's ability to think thinks because it was life in him, that's where life comes from. Are you all clear? We'll never get life in a test-tube unless we've actually let a little bug get in there. We'll never create life. We'll somehow think we've created it because there was life in there that we couldn't isolate, but there's only one place where life comes from and that's in Jesus, both natural and spiritual life comes from his life.

So none of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself. Suicide -- who of us haven't thought it might be an answer. Who of us haven't had moments of depression thoughts? But you don't have any right -- you don't have a right. You are not your own. You're not killing something that is yours to kill. You belong, and are a part of, Jesus and part of our Creator. So he is vitally concerned with

what you are doing these days.

So will you begin to spend some time in quietness; listening for the footsteps of God and finding out what he wants you to do? Forgetting what all the rest of us think about euthanasia, and abortion, and all the other things. Start finding out what God wants you, personally, to think and let him deliver you from this idol that we have set up in our day. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we're brought up to respect what everybody else thinks. And Lord, we do know that there are many godly people who can tell us things. And we do know that we should confirm with them what we get from you, but Lord we thank you that we're personal and individual and you have a plan for us that you have for nobody else. We've to listen first to you and only then ask somebody else what they think of that. But Lord even then we realize that we have to bow before you first and simply check back with you and see if what you said is what we understood. And then Lord, we are to do that.

Lord, we thank you that that's your way for us to walk like [Robert] Frost and "The Road Not Taken." Lord we want to walk that road. We know that that makes all the difference in our lives; if we walk the individual road you have for us. We know that that's what you are yourself: so real and such integrity and such reality. So Lord, we commit ourselves to beginning to listen for the footsteps of God in our lives and to begin to look to see what your idea is for us, and what you had in mind when you put us here in the first place.

Lord we ask you to help each of us to do that. Now, 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.