

A Serving Spirit

Romans 14:13

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Loved ones, one of the most paradoxical incidents in Jesus' life is found in John 8.

John 8:3, "The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" This they said to test him that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked up and said to her, 'Woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.'

Now, the issue isn't that Jesus condones sin or that he suggested that adulterers would get into heaven because it's very obvious what the woman had to do to please God. Jesus said very plainly, "Go, and do not sin again." So obviously the difficulty is not about sin. Jesus is very clear about that, "Go and do not sin again if you want to please my father in heaven. You can be free from sin and it's your responsibility to be free from sin. So I am telling you go and do not sin again." So that isn't the difficulty.

Surely the paradox is that Jesus was so hard on the Pharisees, who you remember were always judging everybody and telling everybody where they were wrong. Jesus, who was so hard and so vehement in his condemnation of the Pharisees, when he faced this woman who was caught in the very act of adultery, one that was a blatant, obvious sinner, he said, "I do not condemn you." That's the paradox, loved ones, that Jesus who was so hard in condemning those who condemned others, refused to condemn such an obvious sinner as this adulteress.

Now, why is that? Why that paradox? Why did Jesus, who bore the sin of the world in his body on the tree, why when he faced one of these blatant sinners that had caused his death to be necessary on Calvary, why did He say, "I don't condemn you"? You know, the answer is very plain and you'll find it just a few chapters back in John. It's in John 3:17, "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Jesus didn't condemn her because this is a saving time. These years that you and I have on earth, these are saving days. This is a saving time in your life. This is a saving time in my life. This isn't a condemning time.

There'll be a condemning time. Jesus spoke about that you remember in that lesson that we read for the New Testament lesson. He said, "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' [Matthew 25:31-41]

There will be a condemning time, loved ones, when Jesus comes again in glory; the great white throne judgment will take place. But until that moment, Jesus condemns no one. He saves. He came to save and this is a saving time. This is a saving time for all of us. This isn't a condemning time. The amazing thing is it doesn't matter how bad you are, it doesn't matter how rotten you are, at this moment.

God, in his bewildering, mysterious graciousness says, "Until you die, this is a saving time for you. This is a time when all I will do is try to save you. I won't condemn you through this time." That's what that verse means. Jesus came not to condemn the world this time but to save it. Now, he'll come again and it'll be to condemn part of the world but this time -- and we're living in the days of Jesus and the Son and the Holy Spirit -- these are saving times.

In other words, if you get depressed and you begin to feel that old condemnation and you begin to feel, "Oh I am just hopeless. I am hopeless. There's no hope for me ever being accepted by God. I've fallen yet again", be assured of this, that that sense of condemnation is not coming from the Son or from his dear counselor, the Holy Spirit.

You can be sure of that, on the basis of John 3:17, that Jesus has come not to condemn the world this time but to save it. You can be sure that whatever depression you feel or whatever sense of condemnation you feel, it is not God that is bringing it to you. There is only one that brings that sense of condemnation to any of us and I'll show you who that is, loved ones.

Revelation 12:10, "And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.'" That's the only one who accuses you in this dispensation.

The accuser of the brethren, the one who takes the brethren in Christ and accuses them and charges them and condemns them and brings them into a spirit of depression, is Satan. It is Satan that does that. The Holy Spirit doesn't do that. Holy Spirit's conviction is different. It's a joyous thing. He says, "You're being dishonest with that person; forsake that sin and receive God's forgiveness." You do that and the Holy Spirit comes in in a sense of joy and acceptance from God. That's the way the Holy Spirit convicts.

It's conviction that is very definite, very particular for some sin that you can repent and forsake and have done with and rise into life in God. Now, if you hesitate on that, if the Holy Spirit convicts you of something by showing you, "Look, that's wrong, you'd better stop," and you hesitate about repenting, then what Satan does is come in with his condemnation on top of the good conviction of the Holy Spirit.

That's what many of us do. We hesitate when the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and instead of repenting of it and showing a penitent heart by saying, "Lord, we want to follow you whatever the cost," we hesitate on the thing and Satan comes in with his condemnation and mixes it up with the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Then we say, "Oh, I am getting so depressed because of the conviction." Well, you're not getting depressed because of the conviction. You're getting depressed because of the false condemnation of Satan and you're opening yourself to that because you don't immediately repent of your sin and turn from it. So loved ones, if you ever come into depression or condemnation in your own life, you can know it comes from one place.

If you ever come into condemnation from other people or criticism from other people, you know it comes from one place because the Lord Jesus has promised us, these days are saving days. Wherever the Spirit of Jesus moves in this dispensation, he moves in saving power. He is always a saving person. He is always giving you a sense of God's grace and God's mercy and God's forgiveness.

So you know, be certain of that in your own hearts. Whenever you feel a vague sense of condemnation, a vague sense of something's wrong or whenever you face a whole lot of generalized condemnations or criticisms, you always know it comes from one source, from the pit that wants to make sure you live there forever. But Jesus himself is always a saving person in these days and so it's a glorious reassurance to us that that's the case. That is what Paul begins to talk about in the verse that we're studying today. It's in the light of that fact that these are saving days; this is a saving spirit that comes from God in this dispensation.

Romans 14:13, "Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother." In other words, the life that we've to live today with each other is a way of gladness. It's a way where our hearts are filled with joy and gladness and love to each other. These are the days when we do everything to lift each other up into Jesus.

We've only got 70 years, you know. Most of us have only got 70 years with each other here and these days are precious, loved ones. My job is to try to get you into the arms of Jesus. Your job is to try to get me into the arms of Jesus. My job isn't to condemn you or criticize you. Your job isn't to condemn or criticize me. These are precious days. These are days of respite when we are to do everything that we can to bring each other into an awareness that Jesus at this moment has his arms open towards us.

Now, if you say to me, "Oh, well, brother, who will tell us what's wrong in our lives if we don't tell each other? I have children and they're not going the way I would like them to and I feel I should get that home to them. Or I have parents that aren't going the right way and I feel I should tell them where they're wrong. Or I have friends at work and I feel I need to put them right. Now, who is going to tell those people what is right, if you say this is just a saving time?"

Oh, there's only one. There's only one. There's only one who can do it, loved ones. There is only one who is appointed by God himself, in these days, in this present dispensation to convict of sin. Not even God himself has that responsibility. The Father judges no one. He has given it to the Son but even the Son is not in this dispensation here to judge and condemn, there's only one.

When the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict the world of sin. The Holy Spirit alone can convict us of sin in a saving way and he does it in different ways. Sometimes he does it through God's word. You can see that mentioned in Hebrews 4. Sometimes the Holy Spirit does it directly through this dear book and that's what this verse says.

Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do."

Sometimes the Holy Spirit convicts us through God's word. Sometimes you're sitting here on a Sunday and you get something from God's word that actually none of the rest of us are getting. It's

something special that God lights up in your heart and makes real to you. The word of God proves to be sharper than a two-edged sword to you. Often it's a two-edged sword because it often cuts back on the one who is wielding it also. So the sword of the spirit works all ways. Often you come to church or you hear some verse of the Bible or somebody quotes to us the Bible and it cuts right to your heart and you suddenly see, "Yeah, I am wrong in that. I am wrong. I'll have to forsake that sin." So the Holy Spirit at times uses God's word. At times, the Holy Spirit uses another person.

I still remember when I was 17 and I went to an ecumenical conference in Ireland. We were Methodists and I think sometimes we were ecu-maniacs really, but we liked to think we were ecumenicals anyway. We had this conference in Bangor, a seaside town in Northern Ireland. I don't remember a thing that was done or said. I don't remember anything that we discussed but I still remember a certain young man who had such a quietness and such a peacefulness about his whole demeanor that it convicted me of the noisiness of my own thought processes and my own feelings and my own soul. I don't know his name. I never got to know his name. I don't know what he is doing now. I don't know what church he came from but I still remember the Holy Spirit recreating the quiet, peaceful Spirit of Jesus in that young man just in the way he participated in the discussions and it convicted me of the coarseness and the noisiness of my own demeanor and of my own way of talking and my own way of thinking.

The Holy Spirit often does that. He will break one of us here on the point of ambition or the point of selfishness or the point of pride and then he will use the humility of Jesus that he has created in us to break someone else on that very same point. So who of us have not met somebody like that and we felt kind of unclean, at times kind of coarse and thick. And it's been because Jesus, recreated by the Holy Spirit in that person's life, was convicting us of our sin, and so the Holy Spirit will do that.

At other times, the Holy Spirit will convict you directly in your own conscience. You'll be sitting at a stoplight, there's no reason on earth why you should be thinking of your parents, none at all, but suddenly the Holy Spirit applies himself directly to your conscience and points out to you the hideous attitude that you have to your parents. And you have some vast area of your life that while you are sitting and waiting for that light to change, it suddenly all is laid before you in a moment, just as if it was the moment before death. You suddenly see the whole thing laid out before you and you see things that you had never seen before, and you wonder, "Why didn't I see these?" Indeed, that's part of the miracle, isn't it? That the Holy Spirit applies it directly to your conscience and suddenly there's no argument inside you. Isn't that right? There's no argument. You're not fighting it. You're not saying, "No, that's wrong. That's wrong, I am right," because your own conscience is saying it to you.

It's like you being awakened in your conscience and the Holy Spirit is kind of with you. That's why, loved ones, the Holy Spirit is the only one who can convict of sin in a saving way. You see that. So, if I say it to you or you say it to me, it just hardens you. You just harden against it. But when the Holy Spirit does it, it's as if your own conscience is saying it. And you know that's right.

The Holy Spirit also, you remember, convicts through the discipline of the early church. You remember there was an incident in I Corinthians 5 when God uses the apostolic discipline to point out sin that is just coarse and plainly bringing shame to the public image of Jesus' body.

I Corinthians 5:1-5, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that

is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you." Then as an apostle, Paul says, "For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." That is, you are to excommunicate him from the body so that he will realize how far he is from God and will seek, if possible, the forgiveness of sins.

"For the destruction of the flesh that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." [Verse 5] So the Holy Spirit will, at times, use the apostolic authority of the church to discipline in that kind of situation. But, loved ones, those are the only ways. And every one of us here who are tempted to be an old Pharisee with our parents or our friends or our children. Loved ones, we better see we're the only ones that Jesus condemned.

We're the only ones he judged. He said, "If you judge, you'll be judged in the same measure." So don't do it. The Pharisees are the only people that he called vipers and that he regarded as hypocrites. Because they did the same things that they condemned in others. So that is not a way that the Holy Spirit uses in this dispensation.

In this dispensation, these are saving days. You and I are gloriously free from the grave responsibility of judging other people and condemning others and that's glorious. We are free to live in our thought life and our emotional life and our attitude life, free, loving, beautiful lives that think only whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are lovely, and whatsoever things are gracious -- to think on those things.

We are in a position where our only responsibility to our friends and our associates at work, to our parents and to our children, to our friends in church -- our only responsibility is to save them, to love them, to accept them, to pray for them with all our hearts. That's what Paul is saying here.

Let's no longer have anything to do with judging one another but let us rather judge never to put a stumbling block in the way of anyone else, and a stumbling block is "proscomma" [Greek translation] -- it's a block that causes a person to stumble. Now, how would you cause a person to stumble?

Well, different ways. If you're strong in faith and you do see that you can actually have a restaurant ministry or hospitality ministry on Sunday and be right in line with Jesus' Spirit. As he said, "Is it better to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath?" If you are strong in faith and you say, "Yes, that's very reasonable and it's better to have them in a restaurant rather than have them at home not in touch with Jesus at all." But somebody weak in faith, or somebody young in faith, thinks, "Oh no, no, you shouldn't. You shouldn't have a restaurant open Sunday." or, "You shouldn't indulge in any kind of work on a Sunday." Then you can cause a stumbling block to them as a stronger person, if you say, "Well, do it anyway." No, you must allow them to act by their own conscience. Otherwise, you put a stumbling block in their way. Why? Because you get them to work in a restaurant on Sunday? No. You get them to sin against their conscience. That's what Paul said you remember.

Some of the young in faith were just out of Judaism and they said, "Now, we have to keep the Jewish law. We have to keep the Jewish Sabbath and we have to avoid eating meat." Some of those who were stronger in faith, said, "No, the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death. You don't have to abide by those things." Paul is saying, "Now you young ones

shouldn't criticize the old ones. You weak ones shouldn't criticize the strong ones because they are on another step and they're into another place with Jesus. But at the same time, you strong ones should look down on the weak ones and you shouldn't force them against their admittedly young conscience to do what you think. You must let them carry on, avoiding eating meat if they think that's right, or keeping the Jewish Sabbath if they think that's right, because you're teaching them to respect the conscience within them which is the main instrument that the Holy Spirit uses to guide them to Jesus."

So, we need to be careful ourselves that we don't put a stumbling block in each other's way. You have to live at your level of conscience and I have to live at my level of conscience. If I touch your conscience, I touch something holy and if you touch my conscience, you touch something holy. If I say you're wrong or you say I am wrong, you're a liar and I am a liar. Because there's only one who can tell us we're wrong and that is the Holy Spirit who knows what he has put into our consciences and knows whether we're acting against our conscience or not.

So loved ones, it's a holy ground that we're on when we engage in any of this kind of thing, me judging you or you judging somebody else, don't do it. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. Now, there's a more serious word that Paul uses, loved ones. This is maybe the more serious side of all of this. It's in Romans 14 and maybe you should look at the verse again and I'll tell you what the Greek word is.

Romans 14:13, "Then let us no more pass judgment on one another." Actually it's the present subjunctive that really reads in Greek, "Then let us no more be passing judgment on one another." Let's stop that "but rather judge ["krinate", it's the same word] never to put a stumbling block." That's "proscomma" what we've been talking about, where you try to get the other one to live up to what you thought you should do or to live in the liberty that you have. It's stumbling block, "proscomma". "Or a hindrance in the way of the brother." The word "hindrance" is "skandalon" and it literally means a trigger that sets off a death trap. How do you do that? I'll tell you. You have children that smoke or drink or you have parents that swear or you have your husband that doesn't go to church. You know he should go to church. You know the children shouldn't smoke and they shouldn't drink. You know your parents shouldn't swear or you know your associates at work shouldn't crack the dirty jokes and so you mow in there and you start telling them.

You start saying something to them that the Holy Spirit has not yet said in their conscience. You can spoil months and even years of patient, gentle work done by the Holy Spirit in their conscience, you can. You can set off a trigger that becomes a trap for death, spiritual death in their lives, by coming in over the top with all your best thoughts and trying, as you think, to reinforce what God is saying to them. Except that you have no idea what God has said to them because only the Holy Spirit knows that. And instead of the Holy Spirit being gently able to nudge them closer and closer to seeing that the swearing is wrong or seeing that the preoccupation with money or the preoccupation with clothes is wrong -- instead of the Holy Spirit being gently able to woo that husband so that he gradually comes to the death of a friend and sees how serious life is and begins to realize he needs to start seeking God -- our judgment comes over the top and bangs it home to their heads. That's the only place you can get. You can't touch their consciences. That's as deep as you and I can get, with all our great talk. You bang it home to their heads. You give them more knowledge. It's there already. They know about drinking and smoking. They know about preoccupation with clothes and with money.

They know they should seek God but you bang it home again to their heads and they resent you and

they react against you. They identify you with the little tiny voice that was beginning to draw them towards Jesus in their conscience and they quash that voice too. Because you never bring it home with the wooing and the loving affection that the Holy Spirit does.

So, you end up setting a trigger that becomes a death trap for them spiritually. Loved ones, there is no place for you or me telling each other where we're wrong. There isn't, except for that apostolic position that is outlined in the New Testament. The only one who can tell us in a saving way is the blessed Holy Spirit. And for us here these are saving days, these are joyful days, these are rejoicing days.

If you say to me, "What do you do with your children? What do you do with your parents? What do you do with your colleagues? What do you do with your friends? What do you do with your church members?" You love them. You love them with all your heart, you accept them because you know your Savior is accepting at this moment and has his arms right towards them and is not condemning them in the least. You love them with all your heart. You want the best for them. You try to make them happy and you see them in Jesus at God's right hand, whole and well and accepted by him. That's your job and mine.

Our job is a saving job and that's why it's a way of gladness, you know. That's why it's a way of gladness. That's why when Christians get into judging or criticism, the guilt, the guilt of the Holy Spirit comes upon them and the heaviness of Satan comes upon them. Don't do it.

I don't know how many of you are even from other churches or know some of the things that have gone on in the cities these past months. I wouldn't try to whitewash any, but funny enough, the problem is not the errors or the mistakes that loved ones make. The problem is the way all us, all of us give up this joyful, glad, rejoicing way where we love people and we take on the position of Pharisees and we start judging and we lose our own souls and we tear apart the body of Christ. That's really the problem.

Whatever church you think of in the cities, the problem actually isn't the original thing. The problem is the way we get into it with our own will power and our own effort. I would just share with you these are saving days. This is a saving time. This is a saving time. We have 70 or at the most 80 precious years here to save each other. Oh, talk each other up. Make each other feel good. Be loving to each other. Be gentle with each other.

Every time you see something wrong in each other, turn your mind from it and turn to the Christ-likeness in each other and pray for each other and love each other. Keep your mouth shut. Don't say anything to anybody, neither to the person or anybody else about them. Keep your mouth shut and love each other. Then the blessed Holy Spirit will do his work faithfully, well, and solidly in the consciences of those that we love and he will do it and he will do it in a saving way. When he does it the result is eternal life and salvation.

So you know, let's thank God that we don't have to pass judgment. Let us no longer be passing judgment on one another. Let us rather judge not to put a stumbling block, not to put a stumbling block of any kind or a death trap in the way of each other. Let's leave the Holy Spirit the job that he alone, the third person of the trinity, can do. He can convict the world of sin. Thank God, we've only to take part in trying to save it. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you that we can know beyond all shadow of doubt that any condemnation that

comes to us in this life, comes from the accuser of the brethren, who accuses them day and night before God and we can resist Satan and he'll flee from us. So thank you, Lord, that when a mass of generalized condemnation comes upon us from outside or from inside, we can resist Satan in Jesus' name and he'll flee from us.

We thank you Holy Spirit, that you are sweetly convicting us day-by-day of things that you want to see changed in our lives. We thank you that our obligation is to you in our conscience. We thank you that we can trust you to do that job and that your conviction is always definite in particular and always brings life with it. It's always something we can do something about. It doesn't bring that hopelessness of feeling we can do nothing about. It always brings that sense, "Yes, we can forsake this sin. God will receive us to Himself again." So we thank you for that.

Then, we thank you most of all, Lord, that you have given us an easy way to walk in these 70 years here on earth. These are saving days. This is a saving time. Our only obligation is to think of whatsoever things are true and lovely and of good report. Our only place is to think well of each other and believe the best for each other and love each other. That is our contribution to each other's salvation and we thank you that in the context of that, the blessed Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment. He will bring us into Jesus' arms and bring our loved ones there and our friends and our colleagues. We thank you, Lord.

Lord, we commit ourselves to walk in that way during this coming week and to abstain from all judgment and to take part in your saving work. 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.