A Changed Life

Romans 9:4c

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O’Neill

One of the most startling experiences that most of us have is when we have a ding-dong battle with our father and in one of those brief intervals our mother draws us aside and says, "You know why you two are always at it? You're just like one another." And we say, "I'm not like him!" And our dad who hears it says, "If he were like me, he'd agree with me all the time." We just all have had it, you know, in one form or another. The point is that whether it's by heredity or whether it's because of environment -- because you have been brought up with your father's influence around you right from the beginning -- you know that you somehow have inherited a lot of the traits of his personality. And in fact, you would say there are attitudes that surge right up from deep down within you and you don't know where they have come from. But you do know that they are exactly the ones that your dad would express -- or your mom would express.

In a way, that inherited personality that you have is partly responsible for our cry of despair in Romans 7:15. It really is. Part of our cry of despair there is due to the inherited personality that we have got from our parents. I don't understand my own actions. I don't do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Many of the things that we see in our dad or mom we find ourselves doing, and we hate it -- and we don't want it -- but we do it. It's because deep, deep down we are a certain kind of person that, at times, we don't like too much. Nevertheless, the cry of despair, "I don't understand my own actions; I don't do what I want; I do the very thing I hate!" is due to a broader and deeper heritage that you and I have received -- broader and deeper than the heritage we have received from our parents.

Loved ones, it's the heritage we have received from the whole race of mankind that has preceded us. Really, there is a whole set of fears about survival, of worries about the future, of lashing out at somebody who appears to want to hurt us -- a whole series of reactions and responses that you and I have in our lives that come from primeval depths of personality that have been formed in the race of mankind throughout the years. That's part of the meaning of a verse here in this book [Bible]. Maybe you'd look at it because it's a verse that you probably never have been able to interpret completely, and I certainly didn't for a long time. It's Ephesians 2:1,3, and you might get the grammatical construction if we read from verse 1. "And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience." And then verse 3, "Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

And really, that's the trouble we have. We're not just children of our mom and dad, but loved ones, we're also children of wrath like the rest of mankind. That is, we have forefathers who rebelled against our dear Father who created the world, and wanted to live as if he did not exist. As a result, in order to make them aware of that, our dear Father withdrew from them a sense of his daily protection and care. And so they began to develop emotions of flight and fight in order to survive in a world that had no one that apparently controlled it.

Now, that's what it means to be children of wrath. God's wrath is not uncontrolled anger. It is his withdrawal of an awareness of his daily protection and care from those who do not want it. And people like that are children of wrath because they then begin to try to develop their own means of survival and their own means

of security -- and the only way to do that is anger and bad temper and selfishness and self-protectiveness. And so in a way, we are children of wrath -- and the reason you end up saying, "I don't understand my own actions. I don't do what I want. I do the very thing I hate", is because you have a personality that is wrong. You have, loved ones. We all have personalities what are filled with wrong responses. And do you see, that's why the center of Jesus' teaching is the New Birth. Jesus knows fine and well that he could lay on us all the laws in the universe and it still would make no difference to us. We still couldn't obey those laws.

Jesus knows he could give us the best advice, the clearest analysis of our problem that is possible and we still couldn't do anything because Jesus knows what is wrong is us. We are wrong. We have personalities that we've inherited from our parents, that they've inherited from their parents, from their parents, from their grandparents, from their great-grandparents, from their great-great-grandparents, right back to Adam. And these contain all kinds of attitudes that are characteristic of children who live on a little globe, spinning through millions and millions of areas of miles of space and they're not sure who is looking after them. And that has developed a strong, racial, human character that's wrong.

What you need is a character that does not immediately start the old adrenaline pumping when it sees the bank account is overdrawn. Do you see that? Because you know in your heart you've tried to control that, and you've tried to control that kind of reaction by all kinds of good sense. You've said, "Well, I've Ready-Reserve." "I'm O.K." Or, "I've given." You've used all kinds of other rationalizations to deal with these moments when the wrong response comes out. And yet you cannot overcome it. And Jesus knows that what you need is a new kind of character, a character that does not immediately lash out at the latest critic in the office, but a character that immediately commits your own

reputation among your colleagues to God -- and begins to love that dear one. Now that is why Jesus says "You need to be born again," -- and that's what becoming a Christian is, loved ones. It's being born again.

Just to clarify what that means, would you look at Galatians 4 and verse 6. "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" That's what it means to become a Christian. God takes the spirit of Jesus and sends it into you. And you begin to feel like Jesus. You begin to think like Jesus, and you begin to respond like Jesus. You begin to know God as your dear Father as Jesus does. That's what it means, loved ones. It means a change from what you are inside to what Jesus himself is.

Now that's the phrase, you remember, that Paul uses in the verse we are studying today in Romans. It's Romans 9:4. "They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises …" They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship. Now could you be born again in the Old Testament then? Was it possible for Israelites to be born again like that? The Greek word is "huiothesia" and it means adoption. And when Paul says, "to the Israelites belong the sonship", he's really saying, "to the Israelites belong the adoption." And he's really saying God adopted Israel as a special nation through which he was going to reveal himself to the rest of the world.

It's in that sense that the Israelites were adopted. But, I don't need to tell you -- because some of you have adopted children -- that adoption is primarily an action of the parents. It doesn't imply any change in the character of the child. It really is an initiative of the parents. They undertake the responsibility and the care of this child and they undertake to give that child the same legal rights as their own child would have. But it's primarily an action of

the parents. In some instances, I agree with you, an older child may be able to express an opinion of whether he would like to live in this home or would like to live with these people or not, but even then, the action of adoption is primarily an action or initiative of the parents. And loved ones, above everything else, the child doesn't need to change at all. It does not imply any change in the child's character.

Now that's the kind of adoption that the Israelites experienced. It really didn't imply any change in their own character. It was God saying, "I'm going to use this nation to reveal myself to them and to show myself through the care and protection that I provide them. I'm going to make myself real to the rest of the world." That was the sense in which the Israelites were adopted. But loved ones, you can see it really didn't imply any change necessarily in them. If you look at Hosea and chapter 11, the lesson we read last Sunday morning, and verses 1 and 2: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Ba'als, and burning incense to idols." In other words, the adoption that the Israelites experienced was a legal change in relationship between them and their God, but it didn't necessarily change them themselves.

Now loved ones, do you see that being born again or Christian sonship knows nothing of such a legal change, a purely legal change. In other words, being born of God is not working out in your mind, "Now Jesus died for everyone, so probably God loves us all, so, he must love me. So yeah, I must be an heir of all that he's giving to Jesus. So yeah, I must be able to claim the promises." Now Christian sonship, or being born of God, is not that kind of legal, logical inference game. You see that? Old Wesley said it's not. "Faith is not a speculative, rational thing alone. It is not just a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head, but a disposition of the heart."

Now I sometimes wonder if some of us here try to play a game. We try to say, "Oh, yeah, I'm a child of God because Jesus died for me and I must be a child of God, so I must be under all the promises -- that I must be a child of God." And we logically try to work ourselves into believing it. Now loved ones, that is not what the New Birth is. The New Birth is not thinking differently about God. See, I think some of us get into that because you suffer me every Sunday morning and you hear me talking about the way a child of God thinks of his Father and it's very easy for you because you love me and because you sense, yeah, that's true. It's very easy for you to say "I'm going to start thinking that way too. I'm going to start thinking of God as my Father."

Now loved ones, do you see, it's a mental game? That's all it is. Because Christian sonship is not just adoption. It is not concluding in your mind that you're in a legally different relationship to God to what you used to be before you knew really what he was like. Christian sonship is a real change in your nature. It's a real change inside. It's an inner change which God works in your heart through the Holy Spirit that he sends into you. It is not just a mental adaptation that you make towards thinking of God as your Father. Now, you may say, "Well, did the Israelites nevertheless not know something about sonship itself, apart from adoption? Did they not know something of God calling them his Son?" And yes, they did and maybe you could look at it there. It's that same verse, Hosea 11:1 "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." That is, the nation of Israel thought of itself as a son of God. It was collective sonship. So the whole nation of Israel thought of itself as adopted by God as his own special people -- not for salvation purposes -- but as his own special people that he was going to use in order to show himself to the rest of mankind.

And so, Israel was a collective son. But loved ones, except for a few prophets and priests and kings, individual Israelites did not know themselves as sons of God with all the warmth and the intimacy that being a son or daughter of God involves. It was a collective sonship. They just knew themselves all to be a son of God. Now, Christian sonship is not collective sonship. It's not collective sonship. One man said this, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and had saved me from the law of sin and death." [John Wesley] Now you could see it's personal -- right down the line. Old Paul says in Galations 2:20, "I live yet not I but Christ lives within me, and this life I now live by the faith of the Son of God."

Christian sonship is an individual, close appropriation of what God has done in Jesus to you on the cross. It is not a collective sonship, loved ones. God does not have grandchildren. That is, you can't be a child of God because your parents were his children. God does not have grandchildren, and he doesn't have friends of friends. He doesn't have friends of friends. It's not just enough to know that Jesus died for you or to know Jesus. Do you know that Jesus knows you? Do you know that Jesus knows you? Not that he knows your friend, not that he knows your husband, but that he knows you personally because you have personally dealt with him about this miserable nature of yours?

I think Satan plays a trick on some of us. He mocks humility. I think some of us here have a very low opinion of ourselves and we kind of think, "Well, I'm just a wife. I'm just a housewife," or "I just work in an office," or "I'm just a little nobody in this massive crowd here and I don't know that God knows me, but he surely knows Campus Church. Yeah, he must know Campus Church because they make so much noise and he must know Christendom, and he must know the Pope and he may know

Pastor and he may know the elders and -- I'm with them. I'm with them and he must know me, too." Loved ones, do you see that's false humility? That's false humility. You're a dear person in your own right. If you had been the only person in the whole world, Jesus would have died for you. If you had had no husband, no wife -- if you had had none of the rest of us -- if none of the rest of us had been here -- if you had been the only person in the whole world with that miserable nature that you have that keeps making you do what you don't want to do, Jesus would have died for you. He wants you to take his death to himself for you, yourself, personally.

Loved ones, there isn't any collective sonship. And you're stealing from God a great deal of life and faith that you are meant to receive from God, himself, and to give to the rest of us because you're psyching yourself or you're exempting yourself from this experience of New Birth. And, you're tending to think to yourself, "Oh well, it's kind of a collective thing and I'm with the rest -- and I'm sure I'll get in on their coat tails." Loved ones, there is no collective sonship. It's an individual thing.

Now, was there any mention of sonship as we know it among the Jews? Not in the Old Testament. Do you know that there was a period of maybe 200 years, maybe 300 years, between the end of the Old Testament writings and the beginning of the New? That's called the Intertestamental Period. During that time the Jews began to develop some idea of a New Birth. There was a famous rabbi called Maimonides and Maimonides said this: "The Gentile that is made a proselyte is like a child new born. And as to all these relations he had while he was a Gentile, they now cease." And so Maimonides said, look, a Gentile becoming a Jew is like a child new born. But do you see the simile "like" a child new born? In other words it's the same old metaphorical use of the new birth that you find in “Time” magazine. You know it's very popular now in “Time” magazine and “U.S. News and

World Report” -- ever since Jimmy Carter was elected. Now New Birth is top of the pops and everyone gets born again -- but it's the use of the term in a purely metaphorical sense.

You've read some of the loved ones that comment happily now on television, "Oh, it was as if I was born again," and all they mean is that they met some great crisis in their life or they came into a new awareness of Beethoven or a new awareness of something else -- and they say it was like a new birth. So, the Jews did talk about new birth in a metaphorical sense. They meant when you come into a new set of relationships, it's like being born again. And there are Buddhists and Muslims who say, "We've converted to Christianity" and all they mean is, they've accepted the world view of Christianity, or they've accepted the standards of Christianity. All they've done is adopt the mental patterns of Christianity. But do you see the danger with us here, this morning? Do you see that it's very easy for you to adopt the thought systems of this body or the behavior patterns of this body and think of that as New Birth, and say to yourself, "Oh, oh, it's as if I was born again. I mean I just think differently. I just behave differently." But loved ones, do you see that the New Birth is not that. The New Birth is not a change in your mental patterns or a change in your emotional patterns. The New Birth is not just belonging to a group that behaves in a certain way. The New Birth is not just certain beliefs that you have about God. The New Birth is an inner change, wrought by God, the Creator who made you, sending the Spirit of his Son into your spirit -- not into your mind, not into your emotions, but into your spirit, deep down -- sensitizing that spirit so that you become aware of God as your Father. You know him yourself. You don't need to depend on what your friend says about him or what I say about him. You know him yourself as a dear, loving, intimate, warm Father -- and you know that he knows you.

And that Spirit makes you aware of a whole new spiritual world that you never realized was there before. You can come in, therefore, to a service like this and it doesn't matter what the singing is like. It doesn't matter whether any one is singing or not. You sense that God is right beside you and you sense that he's alive -- and you can talk with him and go back and forward with him. That's what the New Birth is. And the only reason it's possible today is because of Jesus on Calvary. And the reason for that, loved ones -- you'll find in 2 Corinthians 5:17 -- and this is why the Israelites could not experience the New Birth: "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation …"

That's just a fact. Some of us get hold of that and say, "Oh, we must be a new creation. We have to make ourselves a new creation because we are in Christ." There's no question about that. But no, Paul is saying, "Listen, if you're in Christ you are a new creation. If you're not a new creation, you're not in Christ." "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come." That's why, loved ones, until God had some method of doing away with that old nature of yours, a new nature could not be created. You know these little mannerisms you have that are just like your dad's? You know the way you smile just like him? You know the way you jerk your head just like him? Now, you know all the other mannerisms and unpleasant responses and reactions that are natural to your personality? Now loved ones, unless you let that die with Christ on Calvary, you cannot be born again. Unless the old has passed away, there cannot be a new. And there are many of us here that try to live as if both can exist in the same character. Loved ones, it isn't possible. Perhaps one is existing at one time and the other is existing at another, but they cannot exist together.

When you lose your temper, it's your old uncrucified personality that is losing its temper. It isn't Jesus that is losing his temper.

And for that moment you have set Jesus aside and to that extent you're of no value for him or to anyone else. But if you're to be born again, the old has to pass away. And you know if you've sat there and you've listened and you've said, "Well, I think maybe I fit into some of those lower meanings of sonship. How can I be born of God?" Loved ones, bring your own nature before God and say, "Lord, I cannot do anything with this. I don't understand my own actions. I don't do what I want. I do the very thing I hate. I need to be changed, Lord. I need to be absolutely changed. I don't need to be just a little better or get a few more instructions from this man. I don't need that. I need to be changed. I need this old personality of mine that is always lashing out at anyone who would hurt it -- or is always wanting to hurt anyone who wants to hurt me -- I need that destroyed. Lord. And if you did that on Calvary, then that's what I want in my own life. And I want to be born again. Lord God, will you start me off as a new person?"

Now loved ones, that's what baptism means. That's why the dear ones in the first century took the people and put them right under the water, because they knew that unless the water covered completely that old being that used to be, there would be no new being rising from the grave. And so they said, "Listen, we're buried with Christ, so that as he is raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." And the only way to walk in newness of life is if you see the radical problem that is at the heart of your personality.

Now I think some of you live under the law. I think you listen on Sunday mornings and, bless your hearts, you know I love you because you want to do what is right -- but I think some of you are trying an impossible task. I think you're trying to do what is right with what you are at the moment. And loved ones, you can't do it. You can't do it. Unless God can do something with that old self of yours, you're just doomed to everlasting frustration. But

the message of this dear Book is that you were crucified with Jesus, and that can be made real in you this morning, and God who created you originally can recreate you this very day. And if you say, "What do I need to do?" Just be willing before God to be changed completely -- to let all those responses go.

Some of them you like. Some of the self-pitying and crying over yourself you quite enjoy. Sometimes it's nice to nurse a little resentment -- but if you're willing to let all that go and say, "Lord, I myself am evil. It's not that I do wrong things. I'm evil myself. I need to be changed. Lord God, will you make real the death with Jesus that you gave to me on Calvary? And will you send the Spirit of your Son into me and renew me completely?"

Loved ones, it's so different to be a child of God because you feel like a child of God. It just is so different. And to be like Jesus because you feel like Jesus, not because your old husband or your old wife are telling you you ought to be -- but because you feel like it. You respond as naturally like Jesus as you used to respond like your father. That's what the New Birth is. It's possible for you -- and loved ones, if any of you are desperate enough for it then I'd encourage you to go to that little prayer room after the service -- I really would -- and just ask God to do that and commit yourself to him and say, "Lord God, whatever it takes to complete this work in me, you do it. Lord whatever it takes to bring me to my death with Jesus, you do it -- and enable me to be born again as you wanted me to be in the beginning."

Let's Pray. Dear Father, I would pray for my brothers and sisters here this morning. I pray Lord for anyone who has been laboring under the law, trying to do what is good and not able to do it -- not understanding their own actions, doing the very thing they hate -- not being able to do the thing they want. Lord, I pray for them now. I pray Father that they will grasp that Christianity is not another endless series of instructions. It's not another system

of ethics. It's news of a mighty surgical operation which was done on Calvary and has been done in pre-eternity and can be done in us this very moment -- whereby we can be utterly changed -- in a moment -- in the twinkling of an eye -- and we can receive a new nature from you by the Holy Spirit of Jesus. Lord Jesus, I pray that you will stand close to any loved one who thinks that this is impossible today and will whisper to them personally, "It can be. You can, in fact, do all things through Christ who strenthens you. I can come in and change you completely if you will be willing to forget what you are and forget what you have been and let that be destroyed with me on Calvary and hate it as much as I hate it, and want me with all your heart. I will come in and I will be your God and you will be my child." Lord Jesus, I trust you to do that in any dear heart that is desperate enough for the New Birth. And 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.