A Changed Life is Possible

Romans 9:16

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Many of you that really do want a real relationship with God find that people often say, "All you have to do is believe. Just believe." I think there are a lot of us who have thought in our own minds, "Believe, OK." We screw up our faces and tense ourselves up and we believe. We are trying to believe, and then these people come to us and they say, "No! You can't do anything. You can't do anything. Just believe." Then we try to avoid screwing up our faces and tensing ourselves up and 'believe'. It is difficult, I think, for many of us to know what people mean when they say that. Often we try to do it the way they say we should do it, and yet nothing changes in our lives.

So loved ones, I'd like to talk about that very subject. How much do we do and how much does God do to enable us to live with him forever? What is God's part and what is our part in coming into a real relationship with him? You will actually see from Romans 9:16 why those people give that advice. "So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy." Now, you see, that is why they say, "Man's will has nothing to do with this business of salvation. It is utterly up to God. It is up to his mercy and his will. That's why you can't do anything. It's utterly up to God. Man's will has nothing to do with this business of coming into a real relationship with God. There in Romans it says it, "It depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy."

You can see that that can get you into a real problem if you take it literally. If man's will has nothing to do with entering into a relationship with God, then why do some of us enter in and some don't? You come to the conclusion, if it depends on God's will,

then God must will some people to come into a relationship with him and he must will others to wander throughout their lives never finding him.

In other words, then you are driven to double predestination; to God predestining some of us to heaven and some of us to hell. Or you have to go the other way and say that God wills everybody into his heaven and we will all be received and adopted by Him; there will be a universal salvation. Of course, the loved ones that tell us to believe know fine well that that is heresy, so they know man and woman have to be able to do something. They say, "Believe. You can't do anything, but you can believe."

Of course, they imply that believing has nothing of the will in it. You just believe in your head, but it doesn't have anything to do with your will, because salvation is not of man's will or exertion. That kind of belief is without any kind of volitional content. Do you know what I mean by that? It is like believing that that is a good car for you but never buying it. Believing without volitional content is believing in your head without it affecting your will at all.

That kind of belief pleases 20th century man. Due to Skinner [B. F. Skinner, behavior psychologist] and the whole emphasis on the determinism in our society, 20th century man loves to think that he cannot stand against his heredity and his environment. He thinks he cannot roll against the influences that he was born with. So he loves anything that says it has nothing to do with your will. Then it feeds something else that is especially known by those of us who live on campus. We love to act in our minds; we love mental and emotional experiences. If we can think that Christianity and being related to God is just a mental and emotional belief we enjoy that. We would rather live in that realm, then in the realm of actions and words. This kind of mental belief

without any volitional content feeds something in us. The normal interpretation of this verse is that salvation is all of God's grace and the way you experience it is by adopting certain mental attitudes to the Biblical explanation of Jesus' death. That's it. That's the normal interpretation of Christianity in these days of that verse.

That, in a way, feeds us too, because we love to face that kind of thing. We love something that is strange and mysterious like that. The explanation is that God requires us all to obey his commandments. Then he saw we couldn't do it, so he cancelled that whole plan and said, "If you don't obey the commandments you will die." Then he cancelled that plan and said, "I've provided my Son to die in your place so you don't have to bother about obeying my commandments; you just need to believe that I have provided my Son to die in your place." That is the normal explanation that we all share in Christian circles.

Now there are several problems with that. First of all, it is utterly illogical. It is God killing the wrong man. All of us should have died, and God seems to just forget that he ever said that. He takes this innocent person and he allows him to be killed. It is utterly illogical. The second problem with it is, it has produced a generation of cerebral Christians. Do you know what I mean by "cerebral' -- cerebrum, of the brain? It has produced a generation of Christians who are just mental believers. There are people who believe right, but they don't live right. The death of Jesus has not touched their own lives. Now loved ones, those are some of the problems that you face with the normal interpretation of this verse.

Would you go with me slowly as I try to suggest what I believe it does mean here? Romans 9:16: "So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy." What depends? Paul is talking about how God chose Jacob instead of Esau; how God

caused ninety-year-old Sarah to have a baby when she was past the age of having children. That's what Paul is talking about. He is saying that if God is choosing certain people to experience certain things that is not man's will or exertion, it is all of God's mercy. In other words, God came to Sarah and Abraham when Abraham was one hundred and Sarah was ninety, and He said, "You are going to have a son." He created the son inside Sarah's womb. Abraham and Sarah had nothing to do with it. It was nothing to do with their will or exertion. Indeed, any attempt they had made to bring it about had brought chaos into their lives. So it was all of God's mercy; it was not of man's will or exertion at all.

It was the same, you remember, when God chose the younger son, Jacob, to inherit the patriarchal leadership of Israel when his father died, instead of his elder brother, Esau. That was all of God's mercy; it wasn't Jacob. Every time Jacob tried his manipulating, snatching, supplanting ways, it brought him to the edge of chaos and only served to sabotage God's plans. The choice of Jacob was utterly God's mercy. It was the same when little Isaac was born in Sarah's womb. It wasn't that old Isaac decided that he would create himself. All the wee soul did was lie there and be born. It was not of his will or exertion, it was utterly God's mercy. That is what it means.

God looked down on all of us, perfect people that he had once made, people who were made to live off his love and off his life. He looked at what we had become, a bunch of perverts who were meant to receive our sense of worth from our consciousness of God's love, but we had rejected that love and now were living our lives in perversion, trying madly in desperation to prove our worth by beating other people out and getting other people to respect us. God looked down at us and he saw a bunch of drug addicts that we had become. We were meant to live off his love, we were meant to enjoy the love of the

infinite Creator of the whole universe and to get our thrills and satisfaction from that. He looked down on us and we had become addicts living off the thrills that we tried to get from each other and from the world of nature. He looked down upon us junkies, people who were meant to have a sense of security from our consciousness that he was controlling our lives and loving and providing for us. We had rejected all that and we had become enslaved to the food, shelter and clothing that we desperately spent our lives getting. He looked at us with all our perversions and physical weaknesses and mental and emotional sicknesses and he did not accept us as we were. Why? Because that would make heaven into hell but he took steps; he initiated a scheme. He started a process by which we could be changed and completely reformed and recreated and regenerated.

It is in that sense that salvation is all of God's mercy. You know how often you have tried to change your anger, your bad temper, your inferiority complex or your sense of pettiness. You know how often you have tried to change it, but you can't change it. Of all man's will and exertion, you can't change what you have become. God initiated a whole method of changing us, and that is why this verse says it is of God's mercy. He decided that he would do something about our situation.

Really, it wasn't unlike the experience we had to create for the first astronauts that went to the moon. When they came back from the moon the scientists were afraid that they would bring from the moon some extra-terrestrial viruses or bacteria that would destroy life here on earth. They were very anxious to be sure that the astronauts returning from the moon were absolutely clean and clear of all viruses, so they created a decontamination chamber. The astronauts had to go into that chamber and stay 24 to 48 hours until the scientists were absolutely sure that they were completely free from any extra-terrestrial disease or bacteria. That is what God did.

God established a cosmic decontamination chamber in his Son Jesus' death. He established it. He put all of us with our perversions into that decontamination chamber and he cleansed us completely. He set the laser beams and the chemotherapy of his wrath upon the chamber of Jesus' death and upon our perversions and upon our desire for love and attention from other people, our desire to grasp all we could, and he destroyed it there. In that chamber, loved ones, all the race of mankind, was ended. That is right. That is really what God says in the Bible.

The whole race of mankind, the perverted, mad, monstrously deformed creatures that we had now made ourselves into was ended in Jesus' 'death on Calvary. I Corinthians 15:45-50 puts it very clearly: "Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit." There were two Adams. We followed the first one and became the perverted creatures that we are, but in the second Adam, Jesus, we became the kind of people that he is. It is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical. So we were first physical beings; then, through His death, spiritual. "The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those that are of heaven. Just as we have born the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven."

Now loved ones, it is in that sense that God initiated salvation. Salvation is utterly of his mercy. You and I can't do it with all our tricks transcendental meditation, our power of positive thinking, or all our concentration on denying the self as the Buddhists do. We cannot do what God has done in Jesus' death. In that sense it is all of God's mercy. In that sense you can see that he has reconciled us all to himself.

So, if there is anyone who says, "I don't know whether he accepts me or not," you can't have any doubt. He has set forth, in a way that the whole universe can see, the decontaminating chamber that he created in Jesus' death. So you cannot question that from God's point of view, there is nothing but acceptance of you. He has already established a process by which you can be utterly changed and made into his image again. So, you cannot question. When you say you are not sure if God really forgives you, that is blasphemy. There can be no doubt that God has forgiven you, because he has created in Jesus' death an absolute complete method by which you can be changed and regenerated utterly. From God's point of view, you can tell that if he has gone to all that trouble, He has nothing but love for you. Do you see that that can only be made real in your present life here on earth, if you are willing for it to be made real, not just if you believe it? You may sit here this morning and say, "I believe all you are saying." That doesn't do anything.

Let us go back to the astronauts. Neil Armstrong walks out of the capsule and sees the crew of the recovery vessel ahead of him and then he sees his wife and he starts moving towards her. One of his superiors comes over to him and says, "No, you can't go near anyone until you have spent at least 48 hours in the decontamination chamber. Then when we are sure that you are clear of all kinds of viruses or bacteria, then you are free to re-enter your relationship with human beings here on earth." Armstrong says, "I believe it," and walks towards his wife. The superior says, "Listen, I don't care whether you believe it or not, that doesn't do anything. You have to get in that chamber." They would just laugh at the whole idea that believing it does anything.

Now do you see the difference, loved ones? There are thousands of us who are being illogical and dumb in a way that we wouldn't dream of being in our ordinary, everyday life. Somehow we think that just believing that the decontamination

chamber of Jesus' death will cleanse us if we would enter into it, cleanses us. It doesn't. I look at the shower and say, "I believe that if I went under it I would be clean." So I'm clean? It is not so, you get in and turn the faucet on and under the water. So it is with Jesus' death.

When the Bible talks about believing in connection with Jesus' death, it means believe in the full sense of the old Anglo-Saxon word. 'Believe' is made up of two Anglo-Saxon words: "be" and "lifan" which means "to be in accordance with". When God talks about believing in his Son's death, he means "be in accordance with" his death; to be in accordance with what has already happened to you in his death. Don't just believe it mentally, but grasp it and embrace it. In other words, God has united you with his Son in his death.

But if you don't accept that unity with his Son and all the implications that it holds for your life (and it is different for all of us). If you don't accept that inside in your will and allow the Holy Spirit to work out all the implications of it and say yes to all that he says. If you don't do that, then you won't experience unity with Jesus in his resurrection at all. There are some of us here who have believed and believed. People say, "Oh, you have to believe harder." So we believe harder and harder, and we are experiencing the same things that the TM-ers are experiencing. It is all a psychic experience. There is nothing spiritual about it at all. It's just a psychic experience with a little power of positive thinking thrown in.

Do you see Believing in Jesus' death means being prepared to accept the consequences of what happened when God actually did put you in his Son Jesus?
It is interesting, you know, that some of us will live with God forever, and some of us will live with others like ourselves forever and will burn in our own selfish lusts and desires forever. It is

terrifying, but that is so, loved ones. Some of us will be with God and others of us won't. Those of us who will, will be only if we have been prepared to accept our unity with Jesus in his death to self, in his death to what people think of him, in his death to looking after himself. Only if we are united with him in his death are we going to be united with Jesus in his resurrection.

Do you realize how far you can go and still not be united with Jesus in his death? I have met loved ones who can explain all of this to their friends and they have literal or mental knowledge, but they have no spiritual knowledge because their wills are not involved. God says, "Look, your old self has been crucified with Christ, therefore consider yourselves dead indeed unto sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." [Romans 6:11] The Greek word is "logidzo"-- treat yourself as really dead. Treat yourself as really dead with Jesus to all the things that he died to. If you say "How do I find out? Do I kind of imagine he died to his Mother, he died to his brothers?" No, the Holy Spirit will interpret to you what God had to do to you in Jesus.

I know it is miraculous, but ever since Einstein the whole problem of time is nothing to us. We see that for God it is one great eternal moment. What you need to see is that God took you individually with all the weaknesses and the perversion you have in your own personality and destroyed you in his Son Jesus. He has already done it. The strange thing is that you are not going to go to hell because you are not in Jesus. God has put you into his Son Jesus; you are there. You are going to go to hell because if you won't accept that in your own will and therefore receive the Holy Spirit of God's life into you. I have used this illustration before; the gamblers in Las Vegas, the prostitutes in Pigalle and the murderers in the slums in La Perla in Puerto Rico, all are actually, as far as God is concerned, reconciled to Him. He has put them all into Jesus and he has destroyed all those things in Jesus. They will go to hell not because they have not been dealt

with by God's power, but because they wouldn't accept it in their wills; they wouldn't let it be made real in their lives.

Now you will see that that is the emphasis, loved ones, in Romans 6:5: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." Then in verse 11: 'So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Now how do you do that? Verse 12: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness." Yield, do not let sin reign--those are all actions of the will. So the proof that any person here accepts their place in Jesus' death is that they stop doing the things that God destroyed in Jesus. That's true.

I know how you feel. I know you are all pleading with each other, "I can't! I can't stop! I can't stop thinking the unclean thoughts, I can't stop being angry and irritable with my roommate, I can't stop being dishonest and boasting. I can't stop!" Do you see that God says, "Look, I have done the miracle in My Son? You have the power. I assure you you have the power. There is only one reason you can't stop. That is because you won't face the consequences of what I have done to you in Jesus." Could I give you an example -- pride? How many of us have real trouble with pride? We are in a room with other people and suddenly find ourselves subtly giving ourselves compliments. You are a good swimmer, so you bring up swimming. You are a good chess player, so you bring up chess. You know how nicely we do it? Very humbly, with tremendous modesty, but it always ends up redounding to our glory. Now, do you see that God has destroyed

that in you? He has destroyed you in his Son Jesus, but one of the consequences of that is that you won't receive praise from other people. Another consequence is that you will be dead to their criticism. Do you see what you have to be willing for in that particular situation? If God crucified you in his Son you have to be willing to treat yourself as not even existing. You have to treat yourself as not deserving any praise, not deserving any adulation from other people, actually deserving only whatever criticism they may care to give to you and not at all concerned about their criticism. So what God is saying to you, if that is one of your problems is, "Would you be willing to be as indifferent to what men think of you, either good or bad, as my Son Jesus was?"

That is what is involved in believing in Jesus and in becoming a Christian. It is not a matter of just head knowledge or understanding. It is a matter of "be-life"-- being in accordance with what God has done to you in Christ. There is a great freedom when you accept all that God has done to you in Jesus. Loved ones, anybody here who says, I did say it of myself, “I can't, I can't stop." Do you remember our moms and dads used to say, "There is no such word in the English language as can't?" And we would think oh, no that old stuff, for goodness sake, keep quiet. There is "I can't." They used to laugh at it but they were more right than they knew. Ever since God destroyed us in his Son Jesus, we can do anything. We can act in accordance with reality. The reality is that God has ended us, a poor, frustrated, perverted people. He has ended us in his Son and he has recreated us anew. You can be like that this very morning.

Could I just push you once more? The reason you won't stop eating is because you don't want to stop eating so much. It is not because you can't. God has destroyed our poor old fat tummy, and he has destroyed all your desire for more and more ice cream. But you won't face the consequences. You don't want to do without it. It is always our will. That is why Jesus said, "They

will not believe." Not "They can't believe", not even "They don't believe", but "They do not want to believe."

So how do you come into a real relationship with God? What is God's part and what is our part? God's part is to provide the whole method by which we can be changed in his Son's death. Our part is to accept that in our wills and in our lives and the consequences of it. That is what accepting Jesus means. It doesn't mean I accept the idea of Jesus or the thought of Jesus' death. It means that I embrace him, and all that he experienced, I experience. You can do it right now. If you are willing, you can enter now into the new person that God has made you. You can be changed this moment, if you will accept what God has done to you in Jesus. If you don't know, ask the Holy Spirit, "Holy Spirit, will you show me what this has done to me, how it has changed me and what changed I have to be willing to accept?" He will faithfully do it.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we would ask you now to show us through your Holy Spirit what you did to us in Jesus. Lord, I want to know myself what you did to me and what way you changed me. Father, I know the moment I am willing to accept those changes and the consequences of those changes that moment the resurrection life of Jesus through the Spirit begins to govern my life. Lord, I know it is true for all of my brothers and sisters here. So, I ask you Father to deal with each one of individually at this time.

Lord, thank you that you have provided the chamber in which we can be completely decontaminated and changed. All our part is is to believe and accept the consequences of your death in us. Thank you.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us. Amen.