

Trust

Third sermon in the series: What the Church Has Forgotten, AA Remembers

Text: Romans 7

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
July 25, 1982

Transcription of the spoken sermon

*"Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me...
God alone, through Jesus Christ, our Lord "*

To trust is to have faith or confidence in; to rely or depend upon; to commit oneself to. Faith is a key word in the New Testament, being the term regularly used to denote the many-faceted religious relationship into which the Gospel calls persons - trust in God through Jesus Christ.

Trust in God involves the whole person. If faith is the most common umbrella term, trust carries with it strong connotations of the total commitment of oneself to another. When one says, "I believe," it is a conscious and deliberate act, but it carries with it the idea of surrender to a new reality.

A variety of terms can be used to describe this surrender, but implicit in the act of faith or trust is the element of acknowledgement - one knows and acknowledges the one in whom one trusts and the element of commitment - the *entrusting* of oneself to another.

Volumes have been written on faith or trust. The nature of faith and its place in the Christian scheme of redemption have been endlessly discussed and debated. Too often trust has been defined and delineated in abstraction and what has resulted is a sterile theological proposition or doctrinal statement. Our interest in this message is more practical and experimental. We will look at *trust as an act of stepping out of ourselves and outside our experience, looking to a gracious Power beyond ourselves, surrendering ourselves to the care of that Power* - that Power that for us has been made known as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this series of messages we are paralleling the Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous with the Gospel of Christ, not in order to learn AA's Twelve Steps, but rather to learn again the Gospel diagnosis of the human situation, the remedy in the Grace of God and the way of life to which the Gospel

calls us. These things AA has discovered and by them alone they live. These things too often the Church forgets, encrusting this way of human transformation with religious burden and institutional baggage.

Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol -that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step Two: We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

That Power was left undefined, our relationship to that Power left unexplained. In the AA program - which is spiritual, but not religious, that Power is never defined, nor must one subscribe to a carefully delineated formula of relationships.

Step Two is little more than a positive response to the cry out of desperation -Is there Someone who can help? Step Two points to the *existence of a higher Power*.

Step Three takes us further -

We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Step Two speaks of little more than our openness to the truth of the existence of a higher Power - of God. Step Three speaks of opening one's life to God. It speaks of decision, thus to a deliberate act. The decision is to turn one's will - indeed, one's whole life - over to the care of God.

Steps One and Two were reflective in nature:

My life is unmanageable!

Possibly there is Someone who will help!

Step Three requires more than the acceptance of the truth of a statement. It calls for affirmative action. At Step Three the alcoholic is called to act to let God into his or her life.

It is the profound conviction of AA that anyone can begin to let God into his life - if he is willing. *Willingness is the key*. One has acknowledged he is powerless. One has come to a point of at least minimal faith that there is a Power - gracious Power. Now one is at the point of decision; one decides to turn over one's will, one's life to the care of God.

AA shows great wisdom in separating Steps Two and Three. The world is full of people who believe there is a God, but too few have ever experienced the power of God operating in their lives. It is the entrusting of one's life to God that allows the

flow of God's power to effect our lives. It is trust - which is more than intellectual assent to the proposition "God exists" - which puts us into vital relationship with God. Trust is the action called for when Steps One and Two have become our profound conviction.

Step Three is the watershed. It is the end of the self-life. It is the beginning of the God-controlled life. This step is what the New Testament means by conversion. It is a turning point. A turning from self to God, from independence to dependence, from self control to God-control, from self will to God's will, from impotence to Power, from death to life.

There are many people who are religious. Too few people experience power in their religion. It is when one consciously and deliberately turns from oneself and turns to God that one is in a place to appropriate the Power that transforms human existence. Only a vital, personal, total surrender of our wills to God puts us in touch with His life-changing Power.

There is much that could be said about the background of this commitment according to Christian teaching. Behind the commitment must be the prior work of the Holy Spirit convincing us of our need. And the work of the Spirit points to the Grace of God - His initiative as He reaches out for us and pursues us through the labyrinth of our human predicament. But it is clearly a biblical teaching that *decision is demanded*.

That decision may be an undramatic, quiet resolution of the heart.

That decision may come at the end of a long process of conflict and struggle.

That decision may be made as a result of a sudden crisis experience.

There is no stereotype that can be advocated. What must be insisted upon is that one must decide to turn over one's life to God.

There is an interesting aspect of AA's understanding of this decision to turn one's life over to God which is largely forgotten in the Church - especially that part of the Church that most stresses conversion. Conversion is not once for all, as though once accomplished one was through with it. Too much of the evangelical Church stresses the initial commitment so strongly that the impression is made that once that is handled one simply goes on as a Christian. Perhaps this is why there are so many professing Christians who demonstrate little power, little of the reality of God in their lives.

AA has discovered what the Heidelberg Catechism understood in the sixteenth century; conversion is not once for all, but daily - the daily dying of the old man and the daily making alive of the new man. AA goes further; it is the moment-by-moment turning over of one's life to God. One day at a time - one moment at a time. Living by the power of God is a dynamic process of appropriating that power, of turning over our wills to His.

There is another AA insight the Church needs to relearn. While we must stress the deliberate, conscious act of the will in commitment, we must know that we are dependent on the enabling grace of God even for such an act of faith. If it were I who finally chose for God it would still be "I", the self determining the self. But it is precisely self-sufficiency of which I must be rid. Thus the appeal to the will of so much hardcore evangelism is still an appeal to self-determination. Rather than having confidence in his self-determination, the alcoholic says only *he is willing*.

To clench my fists, to grit my teeth and to say, "I am *determined*..." is quite different from saying, in total self-resignation and surrender, "I am willing..."

The latter is AA's way. It is a way that acknowledges that rescue comes by grace. As one recovering alcoholic put it,

You don't reach for God. You become willing to have Him take over, and He reaches for you!

Trust is surrender. AA lives by this truth and, if we understand ourselves and our faith, so do we in the Church.

Surrender to God.
Total dependence upon God.
Moment by moment appropriation of His grace and power.

That is salvation, rescue, redemption.

Consider now the experience of St. Paul. I chose Romans 7 as the biblical basis for this message even though it is not one that would seem to speak to the matter of conversion as the church has understood it. Yet I believe this passage illustrates vividly what these first three messages have been trying to point out.

Romans 7 is a hotly debated chapter. Was Paul speaking autobiographically, telling his own story, or was he speaking of the human situation in general? And even more hotly contended is the question whether he is describing the experience of a believer or the experience of one before conversion. Perhaps as with no other passage, there continues to be little agreement on that question and excellent biblical scholars, ancient and contemporary, can be lined up on either side of the questions.

Obviously, I will have to give you space to understand this passage as you become convinced in your own mind. I will, however, tell you how I read it while admitting one should not be dogmatic and should always remain open to a new insight and angle of truth.

I believe the passage describes the human condition - the enigma of our human nature; but I believe Paul does that so poignantly, so vividly, so powerfully because it is a description of his own experience. So much for the first question.

I believe as to the second question that Paul is describing in Romans 7 the experience of a believer rather than a pre-conversion struggle. As we look at the passage I trust that my reasons for adopting these positions will be clear.

Let me begin the exposition by pointing to the text - a cry of miserable despair, an expression of grateful trust. Listen to Paul:

"Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of this body doomed to death?"

There you have despair, although not absolute despair. Paul has not given up on the possibility of Someone to rescue him. Do you recognize Steps One and Two?

There follows an expression of grateful trust:

"God alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord! Thanks be to God!"

Do you recognize there Step Three?

Although the word trust or faith does not appear, it is obvious that Paul points to God Who has reached him through Jesus Christ - God alone; God his only hope, the God of Salvation in Whom he trusts, to Whom he commits himself, the God to Whom he has made unconditional surrender.

Having begun with the conclusion, let us now examine the dilemma out of which Paul cried for deliverance. The great question Paul is dealing with is how a person becomes right with God. Essentially there are two ways, two ways which divide all religions into two camps. Either through human effort and achievement one makes oneself right, or one trusts the grace of God to make one right, trusting God to do what one has found impossible to do.

Paul's position is...

Salvation (being right with God) is God's gift.
It is of grace.
It can never be achieved, earned or merited.

His antagonists, in this case, Jewish legalists, believed

Salvation must be achieved through obedience, the performance of God's will in obedience.

The Jewish position saw the human will as having the ability, the power, to perform, to keep the Law.

Paul saw the human will as powerless so that the more one was concerned fully to follow the Law, the deeper one mired oneself in the misery of powerlessness. Paul's position will be illustrated somewhere in this area today. On a beautiful Summer Sunday with thousands flocking to the beach, the parking lots will be filled and people will have to park on the street and just off the street. Someone will misjudge the shoulder, not realizing it is nothing but sand. The car will sink. As they try to accelerate to gain sufficient power to extricate the car, the wheels will spin, but rather than propelling the car forward and out of the sand, the wheels will spin where they are, digging themselves in. The more gas that is given, the quicker the car will burrow down until the axle will be resting solidly on the sand. The only possible deliverance is for a power from the outside to pull the car out - its own wheels moving in response to the power of the other vehicle, but simply turning as they are turned with no power applied from the buried car itself.

This was precisely Paul's experience.

Read his autobiographical statement in Philippians 3. He says if you want to talk about credentials, confidence on external grounds, qualification, achievements, in sum, one's own record, let me mention mine.

"Circumcised on my eighth day, Israelite by race, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born and bred; in my attitude to the Law, a Pharisee; in pious zeal, a persecutor of the Church; in legal rectitude, faultless." Phil. 3:5-6

That is some record. Never was one more serious about life's ultimate concern. Not one of his detractors could match that achievement. Paul knew whereof he spoke. And where did it get him? In despair.

What did he learn? The powerlessness of his own will to perform what his reason agreed was the just requirement of the Law. He knew the problem was not with the Law. He says,

"...The Law is in itself holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good."

But what did that good Law accomplish in him as he tried to follow it fully? It brought about his death - spiritually. Why? Because he says,

"...The Law is spiritual; but I am not. I am unspiritual, the purchased slave of sin."

In utter amazement, Paul says,

"I do not even acknowledge my own virtues as mine, for what I do is not what I want to do, but what I detest."

What is the solution?

To look to Someone who can do for me what I cannot do myself.

Here is Step One - Misery; life unmanageable/ Here is Step Two - A Power beyond myself. And Paul took Step Three - God alone - through Jesus Christ our Lord!

I believe what Paul describes here is universal. Surely not every person goes through that agonizing struggle because not everyone has been sensitized by the claim of God upon his life. Paul acknowledges that, before the Law came, rebellion was out of the question. But for the person who becomes serious about being right with God - having one's life in conformity with the Law of love and justice and compassion, the greater the struggle, the greater the sense of powerlessness. But I am convinced Paul can speak so vividly of a universal condition because he read the experience out of his own heart.

Is there no let up, no abatement of the struggle?

Yes, there is. That is why I added the first four verses of Chapter 8. The power of the Spirit, which is the Power of God, sets us free from the Law of sin and death.

When I entrust my life to another, when I surrender to God through Jesus Christ, the grace and power of the Spirit accomplish in me what I through my own efforts could not accomplish. Are there any more blessed words in Scripture than this marvelous declaration?

"There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

Here we have the victory cry! Here is rescue, redemption, salvation, help, healing and wholeness.

Is the struggle over? Do we move from misery to victory once for all? Is Romans 7 the state of unbelief and Romans 8 the state of faith?

I do not think so. I do not think we ever move finally from Romans 7 to Romans 8, from the life of misery to the life of victory. Notice the summary of Romans 7 in the 27th verse...

"In a word then, I myself, subject to God's law as a rational being, am yet, in my unspiritual nature, a slave to the law of sin."

To be sure, Paul has made other statements that would seem to contradict this. For example,

"If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come." II Cor. 5:17

And we know the truth of that statement, too. But it is not as though we move beyond the first into the second once for all. Here the AA experience has much to

show us. It is precisely the day by day and moment by moment appropriation of the power of God or, to put it more precisely, the moment by moment trusting, yielding, surrendering to the Spirit that enables us to live in the realm of victory and escape the situation of misery.

Is there no alternative to the life of Trust?

There is none.

But to live in conscious trust is to live in constant power.

And to live in constant touch with God's saving power is to live in grace.

And to live in grace is to live in gratitude.

And to live in gratitude, in grace, in touch with God's power
is to live indeed!

AA leaves to each person the task of defining God. Note Step Three speaks of God *as we understand him*. Here the Gospel of Jesus Christ leaves us no doubt. We see Him in the face of Jesus. We come to Him through Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus said we come to the Father through him and he said, "He that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out."

Have you come to the Father through Jesus, the Son? Can you remember some moment past that was filled with the glory of His presence, power and grace? Can you remember when you said clearly and deliberately, "Jesus, I come"?

Have perhaps the years passed and the stress of life taken its toll?

Would you now in the sanctuary of your heart surrender again to the gracious God Who calls you to Himself, to rest and peace, Who calls you simply to trust Him and find in Him salvation, healing and health?

Come...

He will set you free!