

LESSONS IN LIVING

From Belief to Scientific Faith

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Proverbs 3:13-20 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

This Scripture reading was written back in those days when they thought that you thought with your heart. They weren't really sure what that thing was up here. (*tapping forehead*) That is why when they mummified bodies in Egypt, they just took that part out because he or she wasn't going to need it in the afterlife, whereas the heart was seen as very important. So I'm translating that as "heart, mind, strength," because that applies in our definitions of the human psyche as a full life - to respond with your full capacity.

When I was being raised in Dallas, Texas, once a year they would show the movie, "Peter Pan"...remember, the old one with Mary Martin? There was a scene in that film where Tinker Bell was dying, and Peter Pan would look out into the camera and say, "If you believe in fairies, clap. This will save Tinker Bell's life." Every year I would just feverishly clap, clap, clap. "Come on, pull through, Tinker Bell! We're here with you!" Then one year I remember in mid-clap thinking, "What am I doing here?" (*laughter*) This movie was written a long time ago. How do I think I'm going to change the outcome of a movie I've watched for the last five years by clapping?" What I was beginning to realize is that some of what I've been taught about the world needed some exploration. This was particularly true of my Sunday School class.

My first guru was Jiminy Cricket from the old Walt Disney movies. He'd say, "When you wish upon a star, it doesn't matter who you are. Anything your heart desires will come your way." I wandered down that path for a long, long time, from one disappointment to another, (*laughter*) and if I could find that cricket today...(*laughter*)

But when I'd ask questions in Sunday School, my teachers would always do the same thing. They'd pat me on the knee, and say, "Jimmy, you just have to have faith. You just have to trust." I wanted them to convince me. The questions I was asking were not to ridicule them; I wanted to know that they knew more than I did, because I was a little kid, and I didn't know a whole lot. But what I discovered to my horror was that they didn't know the answer either, and they were bluffing. When I asked questions for too long, they panicked, and I could see that in their eyes. They'd say, "Well, I know that this doesn't make sense now, but some day this will." Remember, when in Algebra they said, "This will apply to everything you'll do, don't worry." (*laughter*) Sure, you'll use calculus, whatever you do. I'm sure we have a math teacher here somewhere, and they can have equal time afterwards.

"You will understand this when you read Scripture," they taught me. "When you get old enough and you can read scripture for yourself, then all this will make sense." Well, I made the mistake

of doing that. I read Scripture. My family went on a long trip, and I was in the back of the station wagon, with the other kids, sitting there reading my Bible like a good future Presbyterian minister would do, (*laughter*) but I was horrified to find contradictions on almost every page! What is this? I made a little list. It says that the mustard seed is the smallest seed, and it grows into the biggest plant, and that's not true! It's written right there, but it's not true! It said that grasshoppers have four legs; how are you going to out-grow that one? It said that rabbits chew cud.

Do you remember that moment when you're sitting there thinking, "OK, they've told me that someday this'll all make sense. I realize now that 'someday' will never come. I'd better take responsibility for my own mind." Do you remember that day? I'd better take responsibility for my own life. I can't tell anybody I'm doing it... I'll fly under the radar here...but these people don't know what they're talking about. You know that knowing smirk that you get when somebody is really ignorant, and they give you this pitying look for having asked a question? There's nothing behind that look, just fear.

That saying, "love God with all your mind"...I want to think about that today. Because what that means is that you can't let anybody else think for you. To love with all your mind means you have to use all of your mind; the reason, the science, the mathematics - very important, the math. But think about this: that you're being asked in a very foundational part of scripture, to write it on your forehead, put it on your doorpost, don't ever forget this: *you've got to use your whole mind and all of your heart and all of your strength*. This important part of the faith seems to have fallen by the wayside, and people don't feel permission any more to ask these kinds of radical questions.

What's wrong with that? Let's ask that question, what is wrong with entertaining some superstition here? We don't call it that, but what's wrong with just having certain magical beliefs? They make us feel comfortable. What's wrong with that? Well, when I was in college I ran across a quote from Voltaire that really challenged me. It said, "Those who believe any absurdity will commit any atrocity." Those who can be persuaded to believe in any absurdity may commit any atrocity. Think of this. [Otherwise] decent human beings - who would never hurt a child - will [bomb a village] if they are told that the village beneath their airplane is filled with terrorists. They say that when you're hypnotized, you can't do anything against your will, but what hypnotists know is if you can get people believing in false things, you can get them to do just about anything.

So to be a loving person requires an honesty, a full use of one's mind. When I went off to college, they said just the opposite. Earlier, my Sunday School teacher had said, "Just believe, don't ask questions." Now my philosophy professor said, "Just doubt. Someday this will make sense. Just tear everything apart."

I loved a quote from Bertrand Russell, who said, "Superstitious people are dangerously wrong. Skeptics are uselessly right." (*laughter*) When I look at the world like a Rubik's Cube and have no allegiance to anything, and am just analyzing it, when I tear the wings off a fly just to see what it does, and think that's just science, good science, there's something wrong there, too. What I came to realize was that my Sunday School teachers weren't answering my questions, "Who am I?, How do I know things?" Neither were my philosophy professors answering those questions. They were giving me answers to questions I wasn't asking! And they were so good that I would forget the question I came in with.

But I'd always come back to it. Who am I? How do I know? What do I need? What should I do? — foundational questions. In philosophy, there was a great philosopher named Burdian. He was a mathematician, I believe, and he had this wonderful paradox that stuck with me. He said that there was a donkey walking down the road and he sees two stacks of hay. They're absolutely the same, down to the last little straw of hay. Two absolutely identical stacks of hay, and for a perfectly logical reason, he starves to death in the middle. It was because he had no logical criterion to choose between them.

What that triggered in me was how we've got decisions to make as human beings, and we can't ever get all the information we need, so while we want to be scientific, as much as we can, there are times when we can't gather enough information. I was sitting there watching life go by. I had this disturbing image of myself one time, sitting under a tree trying to figure things out, and I felt like one big eyeball. I might as well be just one big eyeball, because I was just watching everything, I wasn't involved or committed to anything. I was just watching it all go by as though I would live forever.

William James had a great image that you may want to turn to sometime. In his *The Will to Believe*, he talks about why we have to trust faith every once in a while. He wasn't coming from a Presbyterian background, I guarantee. What he said is that sometimes you have a decision to make, and it's a pressing decision, and you cannot get the information you need scientifically. Sometimes that happens; in fact that probably happens every day for you. To sit there and keep taking in information is to let life go by. There are times, when in order to be a good human being, you have to be not that good of a scientist. You have to act on inadequate information, because that's all you're going to get.

“Love with all of your mind,” I think, means to put reason within the harness and jurisdiction of love. You try to be as scientific as you can be, but your science is in the service of your humanity, of your life. When I was in college, they always talked about how Hitler had used religion and propaganda and superstition on his people, but after I got out, I realized that he had a lot of scientists, too. What we have to realize is that science within itself does not have the capacity to tell us what's the *beautiful* thing or the *good* thing to do. It helps us test that; it has major implications, but truth alone doesn't tell you what's good...that's coming from someplace else. So I think that the formula “All of your heart, all of your mind, all of your strength” means to be all of those things, but for them to be in balance.

What I decided as a child was that I could not figure out what was true. I didn't know when I was right, but I knew very well when I was being honest. So I made that my starting place...that I would be honest, radically honest. What a horrible place to have to start - if you're looking for truth - is to say that you have to pretend that you believe something that you don't believe. What a horrible, disorienting start it is to have someone say, “We've got this load of things that we want you to say that you believe every week when you come to church. Jesus was born of a virgin. We want you to pretend that you know that. We want you to pretend that you know that he rose from the dead.” How do you find your truth again, when you substitute belief for that faith? Faith is the honesty behind the search. Faith is the trust that if you're radically honest, it will lead you to the sacred, and to God. But if we pretend to believe things that we don't at the start, how is that path going to lead us to truth?

Think of the faith that's required to be a scientist...to spend your life looking through a telescope under the assumption that there's something meaningful happening in the universe. Think of the faith of someone who's studying sub-atomic physics, trusting that their mind will recognize truth

somewhere in that strangeness. There's tremendous faith behind science, and I think that's what we're called to. When [the apostle] Paul is being asked what belief means, what faith means, he uses the example of Abraham, and he did it on purpose, because the religious people of his day were legalists and literalists. He lifts up Abraham, and says, "This is who we say is the ancestor of our faith." Did he have the Bible? No, he lived before the Bible. Did he have the Ten Commandments? No, he lived before that. Did he have circumcision? Did he have baptism? Did he have *anything* that the church says is essential to the faith? No, he did not. The only thing he had was trust and honesty. I think you have permission, then, to be honest about your faith.

Speaking of math again, when I was a kid, they made the mistake of putting the answers in the back of the math book, (*laughter*) so I reasoned, very logically, why do the work? (*laughter*) Why do the calculations if the answers are right there? So I'd piddle on the bus with the questions and then...and you know, I can tell some of you did that, too...the unpleasant surprise when the test came...(*laughter*)...and it wasn't about four oranges plus four oranges. They used bananas, what do you do? (*laughter*) When we treat the Bible like an answer book, we've done that to ourselves. The answer means nothing if you weren't asking that question. Do you understand that? Answers mean nothing if you weren't asking the question.

Let me put it a different way. Let's say that this is 1830, and you and I live in houses next to one another. I've memorized every science book in the world, and I have all those answers in my head, but I don't know the scientific method. You live next door; you know nothing of any theory that exists in that day, but you know the scientific method. Now fast-forward to today, and who's in better shape? You're better starting off without any answers and having a method that leads you to truth than starting with answers, even if they were true for their day, but you have no method to test them for tomorrow. *The truth of yesterday becomes a lie today in an evolving universe*, and guess what? You live in an evolving universe.

So faith means that commitment to honesty. If I am radically honest, that will lead me to God. I realize that I owe it to you to test my ideas, because when I believe in superstitions, I can be propagandized much more easily. Love demands reason.

Think if other religions did that. If all the religions that we laugh at tested their superstitions, think how much more peaceful the world would be. You can't do anything about them. But what if you and I made that commitment to radical honesty? What if it started here with us? What if we were to stop defining faith as belief, to stop giving our children catechism class that teaches them answers to questions that they weren't asking in the first place...and instead teaches them to celebrate the questions, the great questions of humankind? What if we were to teach people to test their ideas as an act of love, to teach people to stop memorizing answers and to celebrate the questions, knowing that those are better guides into the future? I think that what we would discover is what the scripture means by wisdom...a celebration of life and the intelligence of life itself. I think we would know then what it means to love God with all of our mind.

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St. Andrew's Church

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14311 Wells Port Drive, Austin, Texas 78728 · (512)251-0698 ·
Fax:(512) 251-2617 www.staopen.com

