

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Loving Oneself as Other*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
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Scripture Readings: Exodus 20:17; Philippians 4:10-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Today we come to the end of what has been a very long sermon series. I'm not sure where this piece fits in the outline; I'll have to figure that out later, but we can't leave it out. It is the last commandment, the tenth commandment, which is very strange... it's the strangest commandment there is, "Thou shalt not covet." Thou shalt not covet your neighbor's house, your neighbor's spouse, your neighbor's ox, your neighbor's donkey. It's one of those places in scripture that seems so obsolete when you look at it; your neighbor probably doesn't even have an ox. It's one of those places in scripture that's just kind of there, and you want to feel that it has relevance, but maybe it doesn't seem to have relevance. It can seem almost mean in a lot of ways. Not only do you not get what you want, but you're not even supposed to want what you want.

I love literature, and one of my favorite plays is "Caddyshack." (*laughter*) Whenever I read the tenth commandment, I think of that great line from "Caddyshack" where the judge is talking to his nephew, and the nephew is saying, "I want a hamburger, I want a cheeseburger, I want a hot dog," and the judge says the great line, "You'll get nothing and like it." (*laughter*)

When I look at the tenth commandment, it almost seems like that kind of thing. But what I want to suggest is that actually, the tenth commandment is one of the most important of the commandments, because what happens at that juncture is that we realize that we have not been looking at a list of rules. These are conditions of the soul, conditions of the heart, and you're not being asked to be merely obedient. The point is for you to be happy, to be at peace.

So what's being talked about is a way of having peace in our heart. Paul writes his letter to the Philippians, one of the most beautiful letters that he wrote. It is probably also the last letter that he wrote. He's not trying to make anybody feel bad in this letter. He's in a dungeon, he's facing his own death, he doesn't know if half of his friends are alive or have been killed in the persecution, and yet he writes this hymn of joy. He says, "I've learned how to be happy when I have what I want, and I've learned how to be happy when I don't." If he was just talking about inner peace from Beverly Hills, California, in a self-help book, it would probably have less impact; but the fact that he has chains on his legs and welts on his back from having been beaten up, and yet he feels that he has progressed spiritually to a point where he doesn't lose his peace of mind when things happen that are bad, mean, or unfair seems like a gift that we want to have.

So what we're talking about today in the tenth commandment is the duty of inner peace. Remember that the whole purpose is not for you merely to be obedient, but to be loving, happy, and at peace.

Christianity, I believe, was born out of the mystery religions, as I've said before. The mystery religions had initiations. The initiates weren't learning facts, they weren't just being asked to believe things; they were being equipped for the journey of life. All the things the initiates were being given were symbols of their journey.

One of them was the sword. It was the sword of discernment. It was the sword you used to cut off those things in life that come and go. That's not easy to do, because some of the things we love most in life come and then leave our lives. What it's saying is to trust that the *length* that was there is going to be deeper than you'd possibly guess. Let go as life changes. That may seem obvious, but our heart can't always do that. When we lose someone that we love, or even something that we love, we can't let go of it. And having peace of mind is the last possibility that we can even think of.

So part of what's being learned when we want to have inner peace is how to detach from those things that are changing in life. And life is change. If you hadn't noticed that yet, life *is* the change. So what the lesson in this is, I think, is to realize that the others that we love are the *burning*, not what's *being burned*. They belong to time, but they are expressing something that doesn't change.

Let me see if I can make this clear with a poem. This poem was written by Edgar Allan Poe, I think at a time when he had just lost somebody who was very close to him. You can almost feel him hovering over someone that he's lost. It's called "A Dream Within a Dream."

Take this kiss upon the brow!  
And, in parting from you now,  
Thus much let me avow--  
You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream:  
Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?  
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.

I stand amid the roar  
Of a surf-tormented shore,  
And I hold within my hand  
Grains of the golden sand--  
How few! yet how they creep  
Through my fingers to the deep  
While I weep--while I weep!  
O God! can I not grasp  
Them with a tighter clasp?  
O God! can I not save  
One from the pitiless wave?  
Is all that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?

I think that Edgar Allan Poe is talking very clearly about that feeling of trying to hold onto what you love in life, and feeling that it's going through your hands; and I think that is what Paul is talking about, and what the spiritual teachers are talking about is a peace that goes deeper than that.

But we have to get past childhood religion for that to even be a possibility. When you are taught to love the *symbols of the sacred* instead of the *sacred itself*; when you fall in love with ideas like God, ideas like Jesus, ideas like heaven – any human understanding of the Mystery – when you think that’s what you’re supposed to hold onto, then when life changes, it can tear your heart out. The purpose of the symbols is to take you deeper. In a moment of trust, to go beyond the change to trust the person that you love is expressing something deeper, something truer.

That was the plot line behind Dante’s Inferno. He had fallen in love with a woman named Beatrice, whom he barely even knew. She was 24 when she died. He saw her twice in his life, but he fell in love with her and couldn’t let it go. Instead of just not caring, which is one of the things we can do when we lose somebody that we care about; instead of just saying, “People come, people go,” he couldn’t let go, and his love for her took him into the mystery of life itself. He went deeper into the fire of change, and he began to see through his love of her, a deeper connection with everything. He had a vision, and I want to read that with you. Lots of literature today; we started with “Caddyshack,” and now Dante.

Dante is one of the most amazing writers of all time. What he is doing is using personal images to illustrate how the Cosmos work. Listen to this. This is written in old language.

Betaking me to the loneliness of mine own room, I fell to thinking of this most courteous lady (*that’s Beatrice*) thinking of whom, I was overtaken by a pleasant slumber wherein a marvelous vision was presented to me. For there appeared to me in my room a mist of the color of fire within the which I discerned the figure of a king of terrible aspect. To such as should gaze upon him, but who seemed there withal to rejoice inwardly, that was a marvel to see. Speaking, he said many things, among the which I could understand but a few (*That’s how the mystery stuff works, you’re not supposed to hold onto this image. Something’s happening, but he doesn’t understand it.*) The king says, “I am thy King.” In his arms it seems to me that a person was sleeping, covered only with a crimson cloth, upon whom looking very attentively, I knew that it was the lady of the salutation. (*That’s Beatrice. So he has this image of this fiery energy representing the Cosmos, whatever powers that be, and in that is cradled Beatrice.*) I knew that it was the lady of the salutation who had deigned the day before to salute me, and he who held her also held in his hand a thing that was burning in flames, and he said to me, “Behold thy heart.” But when he had remained with me a while, I thought that he set himself to awaken her from that sleep, after which he made her to eat that thing which flamed in his hand, and she ate as one fearing.

Again, you have the image of this fiery power, and in the very midst of it is the thing that you love, the personal thing. It’s recognizing that we are the children of whatever that power is, whatever that energy is. We are the children of it. When we go looking for it, we’re missing the point. We find that love in each other. When I love you as an expression of the ground of being, and when you receive that love as an expression from the ground of being, then the circle is complete.

I’m not assuming you agree with anything that I’m going to say in terms of imagery, but we come from *something*, and it seems to be *one* until it gets divided in our heads and in our minds. The symbols of religion call us to that unified ground of being...to feel our roots in it. It doesn’t *rescue* us like a helicopter would rescue us out of our troubles. It *tethers* us to something that doesn’t come and doesn’t go.

One of the images to present this is the tree of life, which, if you take Christianity literally, is just a tree. But if you look at it mystically, it's all the creatures of the world. Every one of us is a leaf or a branch on that tree. By loving each other we find our own roots.

Another image is of a kaleidoscope. When you're looking through a kaleidoscope, you see all these patterns. And while none of the patterns is permanent, each one of them expresses this deep, true beauty.

I heard a story this week about a little girl four years old, who lost her dog. I'm sure this will get around the internet; it's a very interesting story. The dog's name was Abby, it was fourteen years old. The little girl was four years old; her name was Meredith. When she lost her dog, she couldn't let it go, so she asked her mother if she could write a letter to God. It went like this.

Dear God,

Will you please take care of my dog? She died yesterday, and is with you in Heaven. I miss her very much. I'm happy that you let me have her as my dog, even though she got sick. I hope you'll play with her. She likes to swim and play with balls. I'm sending a picture of her, so that when you see her, you'll know that she is my dog. I really miss her.

Love,  
Meredith

She sends the letter off, and somebody in the Post Office that deals with the dead letters must have seen it, because sometime later, she receives a package. It's wrapped in gold, and it says,

Dear Meredith,

Abby arrived safely in Heaven. Having the picture was a big help, and I recognized her right away.

Now clearly, this is an image that she's going to need to outgrow. But that's what her child's heart needed to feel that the connection had not been broken. It took a real person to express that love. It took a child of the Source to express the love of the Source. If we're waiting for the Source to hold us and love us, we may have a long wait, because what these texts say is that only happens when we love each other...when we become the arms that we're longing to see. We become the face in the flame that doesn't go away.

So first we learn that whenever we meet someone, we have to appreciate every second we have with them, because they belong to life, they belong to the fire. It doesn't mean they're burning, they're not the thing that burns, they are the fire, and their faith expresses something deep within that change, within life. Then we realize that it's all one, at some level that we don't understand. We're all expressions of one depth.

Now here's the hardest part: You have to realize that you belong to the fire, too. It's very easy to feel really bad for everybody else who's dying. That's what we do in the early part of our life; it seems so unfair that all these wonderful people are dying, and here we are, permanent. (*laughter*) You know? "The wounds can't heal, because I'm going to be here forever, and I lost this person that I loved." Well, not for long. We belong to the fire, too.

And when we realize that, one of the last lessons in the spiritual journey is giving oneself away. Now if you're a child, if you're young, if you're just getting away from home, this is way too early to think about giving yourself away. Test your wings. Enjoy life. But there will come a day when you realize that your life at this point means nothing to you anymore.

It's like, have you ever taught a dog to play 'fetch'? When you first give the ball to the dog, the dog says, "Great, the game's over. I got it. Why should I bother with you anymore? I got the ball." It goes and chews on the ball for a while, and you can almost see the moment when it says, "This is boring." (laughter) Maybe it'll growl if you try to grab the ball, but sooner or later it loses interest in the ball.

You will come to that point, too, and you don't have to force it to happen. But you will come to a day when you realize that holding on to life, just getting what's best for you, isn't cutting it anymore...that what you want to do, from the inside out, is to give yourself back. First, we learn to love ourselves, then we learn to love others as ourselves, then we learn to love others as 'other', and finally, and amazingly, we learn to see ourselves as a gift we are giving to the world; we learn to love ourselves as 'other', as a gift to the world.

There's a saying in Hinduism, "You are not the furious bee, you are the honey." We can spend most of our life looking for love. What religion says is it's born out of us...it's born out of us.

The symbol of the virgin birth has nothing to do with God having a date with Mary. It's not about that, at all. It's about the fact that the peace within you, the love within you is standard issue; you're born with it. It develops out through you. You don't find it externally if you don't find it internally...that it's in living and loving that it begins to make sense. You're not the furious bee, you're the honey itself.

Another way they say it is you can either *taste* the sugar or *be* the sugar. The first part of life is about tasting the sugar, like a little hummingbird. But at some point you want to *be* the sugar, you want to *be* the justice, you want to *be* the love, you want to give that to other people, and it tastes sweeter in someone else's mouth than it does in your own.

So Paul is sitting in a prison. Probably earlier on, he thought of himself as having a career. He wanted to get somewhere. Well, he's not going to get anywhere. At this point, he's approaching the end, and he writes one of the most beautiful hymns of all time, a hymn of joy. There in that dungeon, with chains on his legs, he's filled with joy.

Dante never realized the relationship he wanted to have with Beatrice. They saw each other two times. She was married to somebody else, and died young. He wrote one of the most beautiful hymns, where his love for her took him deeper into life and into the Universe, and it became a beautiful hymn of joy.

So if you want the kind of peace that Paul wrote about, the kind that the world doesn't give and doesn't have the ability to take away, it comes from loving in this way. It comes from loving others not as possessions, but as expressions of the very ground of being, and from realizing that you, too, come from that fire and return to that fire. The treasure that we look for and travel the Universe for, that makes us plunge into the inferno below and paradise above, is within us all the time. You are not the furious bee, you are the honey.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project*



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