

## God's Love and Death

Romans 8:38a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you ever been addicted to anything? I think a lot of us here have been addicted to alcohol, and to drugs, and to nicotine. But I'd just ask you, who maybe haven't been involved in those addictions, have you ever even been addicted to something like Coke or caffeine? It seems to me probably all of us here have had some experience of addiction even though society may not normally regard it as addiction. I remember I went with a group, years ago, to do missionary work in the mountains of Mexico. It was then that I realized that Coca-Cola, for me, tasted like water and it was then I decided, "Okay, that's when I have to stop."

I think most of us probably have some experience of addiction. Now, you know loved ones that the first difficulty you face is that you have to reach the point where you really want to quit. That's the first difficulty, I think; you have to reach that point where you really want to quit. And probably that, at the end of the day, is the greatest difficulty. But you have to come to a point where you decide, "Yes, I am going to quit. That's it."

Now the second difficulty is, in a way, more serious than that, and yet it's something someone else has to do something about. Because I've found that even when I decided to quit, my body, and my mind, and my emotions had got used to the addiction. My personality had gotten used to this particular crutch that I was using, so I discovered that I wasn't facing simply the resistance of my own will to quitting, but I found that I was facing the resistance of my personality that had got used to this for years, and years, and years. It was like being in a car; you wanted to turn it to the right -- but the wheels were caught in ruts and it kept going straight ahead. You really did want to turn it, but the car was in these ruts and you could not turn the wheels.

I think that's what a number of us have discovered with this whole business of addiction. That you're facing two problems: one, you have to decide to quit yourself; and two, you find that when you do decide to quit your whole personality has gotten used to this crutch or this addiction, and you feel that it's almost impossible to change it. We're all addicts, in a way, even if we're not addicted to specific chemicals such as we mentioned, we're all addicts in that we've drugged ourselves into trying to find fulfillment from the presents that we've been given, rather than from the one who gave us the presents.

We're a bit like the wife of the millionaire who says, "Things, things, things -- you're always giving me things but it's your own love that I need, not the things." Except that many of us here, I think, have not come to that point; we've tried to satisfy ourselves with the things, things, things, not realizing that what alone would satisfy us is the personal love of this dear One who gave us these things.

So many of us here this morning probably still are addicted to a bright sunny day for our happiness; probably there are many of us here that still don't realize how dependent we are on a bright sunny day for our feeling of happiness, or how dependent we are on the encouraging words of our peers for a feeling of recognition and importance. How dependent we are on our living or our working situations for our sense of security. And yet loved ones, all those things are just the presents that our Creator gave us. They're really there to express his personal love for us, and to get us

to begin to depend on him alone and not his gifts.

Now I think some of us here have realized that; I think some of us here are aware of that. We've listened to this for several Sundays, and maybe several years, and we realize, "I know I'm depending on the gifts that he's given me instead of him, himself. I know that, and I do want to change, but I've tried to change. I have tried to think he approves of me; what does it matter whether this friend of mine approves of me or not? I've tried to think that way but my mind seems in such a rut; I seem to have gotten so used to depending on other people's opinions for self respect or a sense of self worth that I have, that when they don't approve of me I find myself in depression, or in anxiety, or worry."

I think many of us are in that spot. We say, "Yes, what you've said is right; we know that we've been given all these things only for the expression of the Creator's love to us, and we know we're meant to depend on him himself and not the things he gives, but we find we cannot do it." And many of us come to the point where we feel, "My mind, and emotions and my body have become so used to depending on things, and people, and situations for all that I need that I think I cannot change. I just cannot change." And it seems to many of us here that we just cannot change.

And yet we all know people who have changed. We know that even though it seems we could never change ourselves, yet it is a fact that many people have changed and they've become different people; they have begun to depend on the Creator for their worth and their importance. And loved ones, it's because our old self was crucified with Christ -- that's why it's possible.

Our old personality that has got into those ruts -- you are dead right we are in ruts -- you've got so used to being a "yes man" or a "yes woman" when it paid you that you are in a rut. You've been so brain washed by the idea that if you had a good bank account or a good insurance policy you'd be safe that you're right -- it seems impossible to change that personality that has got into those ruts. Except for the fact that God did change it loved ones, you're not responsible for changing it; our old self was crucified with Christ.

What you used to be was destroyed by God in Jesus. That's so important that I think it would be good for us to pause a little this morning and look at some of the clear statements in God's word about these things. So will you turn Colossians 3:3, "For you have died," -- the "you" that used to be -- "have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God."

Now loved ones, your personality that is addicted to alcohol or that is addicted to comfort, or laying in bed, or that is addicted to jealousy, or that is addicted continually to the evaluating of your friends -- that personality was crucified with Christ and you can have a new nature if you really want it. Now loved ones, that's it honestly. It's just a lie for you to sit there and say, "Brother I cannot. I have tried." Loved ones, God's word is stronger than any personal experience that you have had, and God's word says that your personality as it used to be, that dear old body that is used to alcohol pumping into the blood, that dear old mind that is used to everybody approving of you, those emotions that are used to having the love of other people constantly feeding them and being offended when you don't get that love -- loved ones, all that was crucified with Christ." And it is possible for you to have a new nature this morning because God has already given it to you if you really want it, and if you are willing to step out in that faith.

I'd press you on it because for years I felt, "No, I can't, I can't." And don't you see dear brothers and sisters that that's the game Satan is playing and all society is playing? Don't you

see that is where psychology at times has gone astray? "We are what we are and we cannot change." No, you can change -- that's what God is saying here, "All that you used to be was crucified in my son. That's why I said, 'I made him to be sin who knew no sin.'" Sin is depending on things, and people, and circumstances for the security, the significance, and happiness that you're meant to get from your Father-Creator.

God made Jesus what you were like, and destroyed that on Calvary. In other words the little ruts that we have equipment to measure that occur in the cortex of your brain that are made by your thought patterns, were put into Christ and destroyed in him. It is a lie to believe that you have to keep on thinking a certain way simply because our instruments can measure the ruts in the cortex of the brain. God took that and destroyed it in his Son. And even though the physical symptoms may still be there for us to measure with our equipment, yet the effect of those in the cortex of your brain -- the thought patterns that you've established for years -- the unclean thought patterns -- were put into Jesus and destroyed there.

Loved ones, it's the same with everything else that you're addicted to. That slavish habit of man fear that you have over the years developed into a monstrous paranoia; that was put into Jesus and destroyed in him and you can be free of it. I know it's incredible, but you, by accepting that all that you were was crucified with Jesus and being willing, of course, to be crucified with Jesus, and being willing to undergo whatever he wanted you to undergo -- you by accepting that this morning can be freed in an instant. Truly, you can be freed in an instant. That's what God means when he did this.

And it's the same with everything; any overwhelming addiction to nicotine, or caffeine that causes you headaches when you don't feed it, that was put into Jesus and destroyed in him. That dependence you have on the opinion of your peers that keeps tripping you up every time you try and be an individualist -- that was crucified in Christ and you can be free.

Loved ones, I'd press you on that because I know there are dozens of you sitting there this morning and do you know -- we all have little things. Some of us are sitting here with an alcohol problem. Some of us are here with some drug problem that looks more respectable; it's aspirin, or codeine or something else. Do you see that we're all in the same boat -- you are no worse than the rest of us. If any of us are addicted to anything -- if it's addiction to men's praise, addiction to anything but to God, dependence on anything but our dear Father in heaven -- we're addicts and we're all in the same boat.

And loved ones, it's to all of us here, not just those dear souls that have so often felt inferior because they're addicted to something that's more obvious or that we've been able to give a label to -- but loved ones, to all of us -- you can be free in a moment if you really want to be, because God has taken that personality of yours and destroyed it in Jesus. But it requires you to believe that; you can't be freed just by your own effort. It takes you to live in that day-by-day-by-day.

Now loved ones, that's what God is saying to us. And the only reason God has done that is because he is our dear Father and he wants us to depend on him, and to trust him, and to love him back instead of trying to substitute all these other things for him. He's like a dear Father that sees his children living on cookies and Coke and he knows that what they need is the good protein and carbohydrates that will make them healthy. He wants us to be healthy, and he wants us to get off these things that are purely temporary and are not lasting and do not do the job, finally.

He's like a Father who sees his children trying to hit all kinds of emotional highs through cheap thrills of every kind and he says, "You were made to have the peace and exhilaration of an intimate relationship of love with me -- that's why I made you. That's why I'm inviting you into the death that my Son experienced to all these temporary things that do not actually satisfy you. I'm inviting you to die with him to significance from things, or security from things, or importance from the people that think certain things about you, or the feelings that certain situations give you. I'm asking you to die with my Son to these things and if you'll do that, I will give you all the satisfaction of an intimate relationship with myself. But I cannot, unless you'll give up all these other substitute pearls that you have. You will not receive this pearl of great price -- you'll have no reality in your relationship with me -- until you accept that these things are wrong and that you are finished with them and that I have destroyed the old personality that was addicted to them."

Now loved ones, that's really what God has done. And that's what it means when the Bible talks about God's love in Christ. God's love in Christ is his desire to have us as dependent on himself as Jesus was, and therefore he invites us into Jesus' death to all the temporary things and situations that are a substitute for him, himself. That's God's love in Christ.

Now loved ones, you'll be able to see then, why Paul says what he says in this verse that we're studying today. It's Romans 8:38, "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And that's such a massive verse that I would just like to talk about death -- for I am sure that death will not be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. You can see why; because death is just the removal of the things that we have already ceased to depend on through our crucifixion and resurrection in Christ. It's just the removal of those things.

Death cannot separate you from the love of Christ Jesus if you have already ceased to depend on those things. Death is just the removal of the sunny day, it's just the removal of friends and colleagues whose opinion is important to you, it's just the removal of exciting little vacation experiences that give you a feeling of happiness and satisfaction. Death is just the removal of those things, so if you've already accepted your death with Jesus to those things, and come alive to the real person, the dear Person, that is behind all these things and whose fellowship and relationship you were created for, then death is nothing; it is just the removal of things that you have already ceased to depend on. And that's why Paul is saying, "Death is just exposing us to the full light and love of this person without the immediate circumstances or gifts that were used to first express his love to us." And so death for someone who has come to depend on the Creator alone is nothing.

That's really important to see -- that that's the way someone who has a loving, intimate relationship with God, and who depends on him alone, feels about death. That's why when I went, years ago, to a little house in North Minneapolis where the dear guy was having one of the most painful cancer deaths that I have seen and I found him writhing on the bed, the day before his death. We talked and then I prayed, and as I was going out of the room I said, "God bless you." He stopped all the writhing, his eyes lit up and he smiled and said, "No, not God bless you but say to me 'God make you a blessing.'" He died the next day, and I did his funeral about three days later.

And you know, just the thought of that dear fellow saying that in circumstances like that brought

home to me that death is nothing for a person who has already begun a close, intimate relationship with the Father. I remember my Dad in a hospital in Belfast. I remember sitting with him through the night and I remember he died at eight o'clock that morning. I remember him saying, "I've come in this time to be really healed." And I sensed the certainty in his own heart that this time it was a real healing; it was a completely new body -- it wasn't a patching up of the old one. And there was a complete peace because death for people who have already begun an intimate relationship with the Creator is nothing but a passing from one room into another, and that's all it is.

It's no separating you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Because for you the love of God in Christ Jesus has meant dying to all the temporary things that you're going to lose when death comes, and a coming alive to the real person that is behind all these things. And that's what Jesus says; "Whoever believes in me will never die." Do you remember when some of them said, "Oh, this man's daughter is dead?" He said, "No, no she's not dead, she only sleeps." You remember he proved it by just waking her again.

And Jesus explained to us, "For those of you who already have a close relationship to my Father and know him as your Father, death for you is just a going to sleep. And you'll go to sleep so beautifully that those who watch you will say, "What a beautiful morning it will be tomorrow." It's nothing but a sleeping and a waking up, and then seeing face-to-face the Person whom you have glimpsed all these years through his gifts.

So really, it's a difficult thing for a person who is in that close relationship with the Father to know whether to stay here or to leave. That's what Paul put so clearly in Philippians 1:21. "For to me to live is Christ." It's not my job, it's not the things that I own, it's not the people I know, it's Christ. "and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better."

Do you see loved ones, that for those of us who are in that relationship to the Creator, you're just looking forward to meeting the real Person whom you have glimpsed so often in the brightness of the sunlight? You're going to actually meet and live with the dear Person whose gentleness made little lambs and soft snow. You're actually going to meet the Person whom you have glimpsed through his gifts, and whom you already have begun to know personally and to depend on in a personal way. And for those of us who are in that situation, death is a gain -- it's not something that separates us from the love of God; it's something that brings us into the fullness of that love. It's like meeting the dear person that you've been looking forward to meeting for years.

In other words, death is only a fearful thing for those of us who are still junkies. Death is only a fearful thing for those of us who are still junkies on materialistic security -- our security comes from the number of things we possess, those of us who are addicted to pleasure and happiness; whose happiness comes from the more pleasure we can get, the more exciting experiences that we get, whose sense of worth comes from other people's opinions. For us, death is a vast expansive emptiness, a loss of all the things that we've depended on, and that are life to us. Death for us is a frustrating experience of constant deprivation. Death for us is a great lonely darkness, because we have lost all the things that make life bearable to us.

Now where do you, yourself, stand? Here's a good way to find out: if you were dead at this moment, what would the inner state of your own personal experience be? If you can imagine being dead at this moment, what things or what people or what situations would you miss most or do you think you

could not do without? Really, where does your enjoyment of life come from truly?

Loved ones, that will help you to know to what extent you've begun to live life the way your Creator really wanted you to. Let's just imagine what you would die to. Let's imagine that just after this service you died. So you'd be dead to your possessions; you would not take the car with you or the house, or the money, so those things would not be with you. Now how much do you get from those -- because you're not going to have them with you. So whatever you're getting from those, you're going to be without when you die and one thing certain is, we are all going to die.

You wouldn't have your friends or your husband, or wife, or your relatives so you won't have their smile, and you won't have their comfort. Now to what extent do you depend on them? You won't have a future, that's certain; you'll have no future. Now, to what extent do you spend your life thinking of your future, or comforting yourself with what you're going to do when things get better? So loved ones, death would mean dying, at least, to those things.

God's will is for you this very morning, to take that position -- that's God's will -- for you this very moment, to take a position in regard to those things as if you're dead, and then to think of yourself as lying here on this floor. We all go home and during the night Jesus comes and sees your body that you've now vacated. He comes in and in his Spirit he gets into that body and he stands up in it and walks out of this room. It is he that meets your friends tomorrow at work. And when they say, "You're looking well" you say, "Well, no this isn't me, I died and this life I'm living -- it's not I that live it, it's Christ that's living it in me. And I am living this life by the faith of the son of God." Now that's what can happen to you this morning, and that's what happened to me one day many years ago. It can happen to you, and you can change completely.

You have to take a step, loved ones. You do have to take a stand, because all of you have struggled with these things. I know you've tried to make a change and it hasn't worked, so you do have to take a stand. I'd encourage you that you could take it this morning by saying "Lord, I am finished with this dependence on everything that I am going to lose anyway, instead of being dependent on you. Lord, I'm going to take a step of faith this morning and begin to depend on you."

Loved ones, you do have to take that step if you want to make a change. Because if you go home this morning and say, "I agree with all that, and I am going to try to change" you know it won't work. You have to make a covenant with God that you're going to change. So I'd encourage you this morning to do that, really.

I think we should pray with our heads bowed. You should just raise your hand if you determined, "I want to make a change." I'll see it, and will pray for you. And that's all; it's a covenant between you, and God, and me. I'd encourage you loved ones to make a definite stand.

I was against that whole thing. I was what I thought was a kind of smooth, sophisticated intellectual, and thought all this decision stuff was mad. But loved ones, I know now that confession with the mouth is made unto salvation, and you do have to, sometime, tell someone, "I am beginning to live my life this way." So I'd encourage you to take a stand even as we pray this morning. And then by all means after, if you do raise your hand, if you want to come to the prayer room afterwards that's good -- if you don't, that's alright.

Let's pray.

Dear Father, I would trust you now for my dear brothers and sisters here -- many of whom have listened to this for a long time and have wanted to change. Father I would trust you now to give them the grace to raise their hands and say, "I'm going to start living this way and I just want you to know and I know that God sees my hand going up." Father I just trust you. Amen.