

God's Love in Christ and Things Present

Romans 8:38d

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

One of the great things that happened when Jesus came as a baby was that we no longer were in doubt about how we should live. We really no longer had any doubt about what living in reality was because all we had to do was look at him. And the way he lived, the son of our Creator, that's living in reality. And probably the most crucial time to look at any man to find out what he is really like or any woman is when they are dying, because whatever you really are like, you yourself will come out when you are dying. You have no opportunity to pretend or put a front on things then.

So it might be good if you would look with me at Jesus when he was dying. And probably most of you know that the gospel writers do not intend to give a life of Jesus, do you know that? That's why all criticism that is based on thinking that they're giving a life of Jesus is off base. The purpose of the gospel writers was to give different views of Jesus so that we would see him in all his completeness and fullness, to see the parts of him that we need to see in order to come to God.

So Luke was one of those gospel writers and maybe you'd look at what he described as Jesus dying. It's Luke 23:26, "And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. And there followed him a great multitude of the people, and of women who bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning to them said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!" Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

And they were all bewailing him and lamenting him and he just had no self pity at all, or anxiety about himself. He was more concerned for them and for the things that he knew were going to happen to us human beings as the world went on. I was tempted in my critical days to say, "Oh well it was just hard stoicism, just insensitive stoicism and cynicism that made him reply that way." But then when you see the way he spoke and was concerned about his mother and about the disciples who had often failed to support him and often failed to understand him, you really can't say he was hard and unfeeling, you know.

You find that loved ones, in John 19:26. His dear mum had been good, but she had often failed to understand what Jesus was trying to do, and often had rebuked him about looking after his brothers and sisters. And John of course, had been as fickle as the other disciples. Verse 26, "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home."

And really, if you imagine yourself on a cross at that point in your life you know how anxious you'd be for some love and affection for yourself and he seemed to be miraculously free of that, didn't he? He was all concerned with the woman down there and with the young man standing beside her and he wanted them to love each other and treat each other as mother and son. He seemed to be free from this kind of creeping desire for some sympathy for himself. And it was the same in his attitude to

the soldiers and to the Jewish leaders that had led the Jewish people against him. He seemed to be free from all demands that they would accept him, or all resentment against them for rejecting him.

And you get that loved ones, in Luke 23:34. "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'" In the midst of that situation his whole attitude to them was, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." No feeling of resentment against them that they hadn't accepted him.

Really, it seems that there was just one Person on whom he depended, doesn't it? It seems that there was just one Person that he depended on for love and affection and he made that very plain at the end. He very quietly said, "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit." So it's interesting that in such a chaotic situation filled with pain and agony, the central figure in the whole drama seems to be most at peace and seems to be the most free from any resentment that anybody was not loving him or that anybody was not supporting him. And of course, loved ones, the reason for it is that Jesus himself knew that all those people around him -- those dear soldiers, the Jewish leaders, his mum, his disciples, and his friends -- all of them were transitory and passing people -- in a few years they would all be gone. In a few years all the experience would be gone and there was absolutely no sense in looking to them for reinforcement, and encouragement, and protection because they would all be gone. And any reinforcement, or encouragement, or protection that he got from them was purely meaningless. It was meaningless. It would be of no use to him beyond the grave.

He knew, of course, that way in the back of eternity he had been with God when all these things were made because "without him was not anything made that was made." There wasn't a Roman soldier there that had been made without Jesus. There wasn't a Jewish leader that had been made without Jesus. He knew that they were not the final source of reinforcement, and encouragement, and protection in the universe; they were only creations of the Father who alone could give real reinforcement, and encouragement, and protection.

That's why it is so foolish of us -- the way we run around and look to this friend for reinforcement, and to that relative for encouragement, or we look to this job for protection. Really, we're looking at unreality because those are all unreal; the only reality is the God who made all those things and all those people and he alone can give you reinforcement, and encouragement, and protection. And all the loved ones here in this room are not here for you to get your reinforcement and your protection and your encouragement from. We're here for you to share with us the reinforcement, encouragement, and protection that you get from your own dear Father who made you. That's the purpose.

God looks down at us and sees us living this lie that we live, and he cannot abide us living this lie. That's why, you know how we've shared, he took that dear, little, squalid, parasitic personality of yours that lives off this word that somebody says, and this encouragement that somebody gives, and this present that somebody gives, and this smile that somebody smiles and he took all of that dear squalid personality of yours and destroyed it with his son on Calvary so that you could be free from it. Loved ones, that's why Jesus died, and that's what really happened when Jesus died.

When Jesus died to the reinforcement, encouragement, and protection that all people give to others, you died with him -- you died with him and I died with him. And it's because of that supra-spatial, supra-temporal, cosmic miracle that you and I are able to be free from depending on other people. It's so dumb, loved ones, when you think of it -- from the wives or husbands among us to the littlest one here -- how we're all perked up when somebody important smiles at us, it's so dumb isn't it? We're all sad when the special person in our life does not smile at us and really, we're just the play things of people, aren't we? We're just the play things of our friends at the end of the day. We think we're the masters, but we're really the play things of them.

Of course, at the end of the day we're the play things of Satan, we're not the play things of people. God wants us to be free from that and loved ones it's possible for you to be free from that. That's what God's love in Christ is, you know -- it's him putting his arms around you this morning and saying, "Look, stop depending on the grades and on the approval of other people, and on the job that you have for your security, and your significance, and your happiness, and your encouragement, and your reinforcement, and your protection, stop. Stop depending on all those things for your justification and depend on me -- I'll love you, I'll protect you, I'll reinforce you, I'll encourage you. Join my son in dying to everybody else as the source of those things."

Decide this morning, "Lord, no longer am I going to depend on the boss smiling at me to make me happy. Lord, I'm going to die to the boss as my boss and I'm going to come alive to you as if you're my boss. Lord, no longer am I going to depend on my roommate being nice to me; I'm going to join Jesus in his death to the Roman soldiers and to the roommates and I'm going to come alive to you and treat you as my roommate. Lord, no longer am I going to depend on my wife, or my husband, or my sons, or my daughters for feelings that I'm worth something, or I'm a good father, a good husband or a good wife. Lord, I'm going to die to them and I'm going to come alive to you and Lord, I'm going to depend on your love so that I can begin to share with them." Now, that's God's plan, loved ones.

The verse we're studying says that nothing can separate you from that love. Nothing can separate you from God's love in Christ Jesus. Today, just very briefly, I'd like to deal with "things present." You remember how it runs, "I am persuaded that nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present." And I think some "things present" do manage to separate some of us here from a sense of God's love. I'd like to share with you those "things" and pray that God will enable you to steer clear of them.

I think some "things present" -- that is, some things in the present life that we have-- separate some of us here from our sense of God's loving us because we misunderstand God's love. Do you know, I think most of us here are brainwashed about love because we remember how, "Well a guy only noticed us in high school if we were noticeable." Or, "The girls only fell in love with us if we were in some way desirable or loveable." And I think we're all brainwashed with that idea of love -- that love is possible only if you yourself are loveable. In other words, we all have a very selfish idea of love and probably because we think of it that way.

Who do you love? So often we only love the girl who's nice looking and the guy who's good looking. We so often love the person who is useful to us. I think we're brainwashed by the idea of love so when you come to thinking of God loving you, I think many of us feel the same; we feel that God could only love us if we were loveable, or if we were very desirable and how can we be desirable to the most perfect infinite Creator of the whole universe? So we conclude God doesn't really love us

for ourselves.

And loved ones that's what it means -- that's why God said, "I am a jealous God." But all we make of that is high school arguments, isn't that right? We never really see that if he's a jealous God he's actually jealous of us loving anybody else but him and he's jealous for us -- he loves us with all his heart. Now, don't you get into all kinds of philosophical thinking over that because the fact is that God knows that that's why he made us and that that will fulfill us completely. That's why it's a good thing; that's why it's finally an unselfish thing. If he, the Creator of the whole universe, knows that he is the most valuable and the most perfect person in the whole universe, then it is very reasonable that he should see that we will only be fully fulfilled if we love him preeminently above everybody else and he wants to love us in the same way. He wants you for himself.

But loved ones, I know that as I say that, that there are hundreds of you sitting here that say, "Oh, he does? Well, he couldn't love me." He does. He loves you for himself. He doesn't love you because you're useful to him. He doesn't love you because you're loveable. He doesn't love you because you're very desirable. He loves you because he loves you and he wants you for himself, and he wants you to love him.

In Deuteronomy 6:5 it says, "With all your heart, and soul, and strength and mind." God really loves us and here's where I think many of us misunderstand; we can't think that God would love us for ourselves and so we define his love as a power that will protect us from everything that we don't like. That's how we define his love. We define God's love for us as a power that will protect us from everything that we don't like, instead of what it is: a will that draws us from everything that is not him. Now loved ones, do you see that? It's really important to see the difference there.

I think many of us here this morning think that God's love is a power that protects us from everything that we don't like, instead of saying that his love for us is a will, an active will that is trying to draw us from everything that is not him. Because he knows that everything that is not him is transitory and fleeting and we'll find that it will disappear like a soap bubble in our hands before very many years are passed.

Now, with that in mind I'll tell you when I think some of us feel we're separated from God's love, with that definition in the back of your mind. Some of us have a great sense that God loves us, a tremendous sense that God loves us -- until we lose our guy, or we get cancer, or we lose our job, or we get into financial chaos. In other words, there are many of us here that really feel that God loves us until some unexpected disaster happens. And then you know what we do? We accuse God, because we believe that his love is a power that protects us from everything that we don't like. We're very selfish and we say, "You didn't protect us from this." And we don't like losing our guy, we don't like losing our girl, we don't like finding our father is an alcoholic or our son is on drugs, we don't like facing financial disaster, or losing our job. So we immediately charge God with not loving us.

Now loved ones, here's what God is really doing when that kind of thing happens. Maybe you'd look at it in Hebrews 12:5. These verses are all about God's love; "And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is

treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

The guy has become too precious to you, or the girl has become too precious to you, or the exam success has become the basis of your sense of self worth rather than God's love. Or you've begun to get so comfortable in your present financial success that you're beginning to think that it will give you security even beyond the grave. Or your success with your family is making you gradually more and more independent of Him. Or your good health is preventing you depending on him moment-by-moment, day-by-day. God's love is a will that is always drawing you from everything that is not him because he knows -- the girl will go into dust, the guy will go into dust, the grades will go into dust, the examination will go into the dust, the job will go into the dust, the home will go into dust, your own healthy body will go into the dust and there will come a time when those things provide no security, no reinforcement, no encouragement, no protection.

Your dear Father is loving you, it's just you can't see it as he sees it; you can't see how the things that you think are so precious to you at the moment are meaningless. They're so temporary they'll blow away in a moment and the Father is determined to draw you from those. Now loved ones, he doesn't do it himself. He doesn't inflict you with cancer, he doesn't take the guy away from you, he doesn't take the girl away from you, and he doesn't make you fail the exam. It is not the Father. The Father never does evil but he does allow Satan, during our lifetime here on earth, he allows Satan to continue to exercise his free will against us. And he protects us when it's necessary to protect us and he allows Satan to get to us whenever he can work the thing out so that we end up closer to him.

Now maybe you'd like to look at that so that you know the scripture for it. It's Job 1:8, “And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?’ Then Satan answered the Lord, ‘Does Job fear God for nought?’” Then there's this false definition of love you see, “Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face.”

In other words Satan was saying his love wasn't love it's just gratitude for all you've given. “And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand.’ So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord.” And loved ones, your Father loves you and he does not allow you to lose any guy or any girl, or to lose any husband or any wife, or to lose any children, or to lose any health, or any money, or any job that he himself cannot give back to you when he wants to give it back. And all he's doing is trying to show you that you're beginning to love something or someone more than you're loving reality itself, which is him.

And you know the provision that he makes in every situation, it's in 1 Corinthians 10:13. The Greek word, you remember, for temptation is also the same word for trial. “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

And I know that any of you that have come through that kind of experience will not challenge this truth that I am going to state: that the way of escape is always a new closeness to God, a greater dependence on him for everything. Loved ones, that is what the Father is after.

And that's why it's so foolish when we curse God, or we stop believing in him because something unpleasant has happened. Loved ones, do you see it's because we have that old selfish definition of love that love is a power that will protect me from anything that I don't like? What a baby definition, what a childish attitude -- you know it. Even in human terms it's a childish attitude. But do you see that God's love for you is a will that persistently, continually, and relentlessly tries to draw you from everything that is not him for your good because you're chasing moon beams when you're looking to the rest of us here for your protection, and your reinforcement, and your encouragement. God really does love you, loved ones. So don't let those "things present" separate you from God's love because it's not God's love you're looking at. It's a definition you have of a lovey dovey God who just lets you have what you want. It's not the real God.

I just want to share one last thing. I think there's another thing present that keeps many of us from not realizing God's love and experiencing the benefits of it in our own lives. That is, the sense of significance, and security, and happiness that comes from his love. I think it's our sheer busyness. I think for a lot of us that our lives are so filled with busyness, the things present are so pressing upon us, and we're so taken up with them and occupied with them that we never share with Jesus the hours that he set apart for just loving his Father.

I think a lot of you really do accept a lot of the truth that God is showing us and I think a lot of you have taken your first steps with Jesus. But loved ones, a lot of you aren't really realizing the sense of security that God gives you inside. You're believing me when I say he gives you it, but you're trying to believe on top of your lack of experience. So you're not experiencing the security, and the significance, and the happiness you get from your relationship with God because you never set time apart for him.

It's a bit like saying to a girl, "I really love you more than everything else in the world." And then you don't see her for the next six months because you're so busy seeing everybody else. It's just -- she knows -- she knows the truth! And so it is with God. He says, "Ah-ha" when you say, "I love you more than everybody else in the world" and then you never, never, never set apart time each day for him. You read about Jesus, that even though he was God's only begotten son, and you constantly come across these statements, "He got up a great while before day and went into the mountain to pray." Loved ones, love takes time. Loving takes time. And accepting another person's love takes time. And feeling the benefits of another person's love takes time and you need to set time apart.

Bishop Houghton spent 12 Hours a Day in Prayer -- 12 hours every day in prayer. John Wesley spent the first two hours from four until six in prayer. For all of us who are saying, "Oh we're so busy. I'm so busy," Martin Luther said, "I cannot afford to spend less than three hours a day in prayer." And then we say, "Well, he only brought the Reformation about -- I have bigger things than that on!"

Loved ones really, many of you are letting the "things present" stand between you and a personal experiencing of God's warm love. Truly, I think a lot of you are being too academic about it; you're accepting what is said on Sunday mornings, and you're accepting the definition. Loved ones, nobody will get very secure on a definition, really. Nobody will get very happy on an idea, you

really won't. You'll only get happy if you know a person and if you love him, and you know he loves you. Loving takes time. And all of us who have loved, even human beings know, love takes time. And so it is with your Father.

So I think many of us are finding Wordsworth's two lines are describing our life in the 20th century instead of acting as a warning, you know. And you remember he says in that sonnet, "The world is too much with us; getting and spending we lay waste our powers." And many of us are taking that not as a warning but as a description of our lives. That's true -- "the world is too much with us" -- don't we feel it? Especially at this Christmas time? "The world is too much with us; getting and spending we lay waste our powers." And it's true; you're busy, busy about things that next month you can't remember what they were. And the achievements that you manage by these activities are probably wiped out the next day.

If you'd put your dear Father first and start loving him, and start letting him love you, you'd begin to find that Paul's statement was true, "I am convinced that nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present." Now loved ones, I pray that that's what it will be like for you this Christmas. I really would ask you to seriously consider setting apart time with God -- even start with seven minutes. Honestly, there's a little tract that we have that we're using with the family groups called "Seven Minutes Each Day".

Even if you normally get up at six why not get up at 10 to six and spend seven minutes just looking at God, and loving him, and reading a verse of the Bible. If you just start there, if you just start doing that not three days a week, not five days a week, but seven days a week, it will begin to grow and you'll begin to sense how much this dear Father of ours loves us and that he really does want you for himself. And that's amazing you know, because you're probably as worthless as me, aren't you? We're pretty miserable creatures, I think, outside Jesus.