

THE COST OF UNNATURAL LIVING

Romans 11:10

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you ever been in a department store like Dayton's and watched a person step onto the down escalator and then decide that she wants to go down to the next floor? The tragedy is that she is convinced that it is just a few steps back onto solid ground. It's like a Laurel and Hardy movie. I watched a lady do it about two weeks ago.

She just got on the down escalator and then obviously decided that she didn't want to go down, so she turned around and lifted her foot onto the next step up, which, of course, began to come down to meet her as she was about to launch herself onto the next step. So she grabbed at the handrail to help overcome these forces and the handrail moved towards her. It was just a tangle of torn nylons and packages lying all over the place. It was chaotic. You just can't go down an up escalator and you can't go up a down escalator. The system isn't made to work that way.

It is the same with a parking ramp. I'm sure you've done it. You are on the fourth level of the parking ramp and you've turn into the 'no entry' opening. It's chaos! The cars coming towards the exit start meeting you and flashing their lights. Then as you go on you decide, "Well, I'll try to get out of it. I'll just keep going and avoid having to turn around." But it just gets worse. Cars start reversing into you. People start yelling at you. If you're a man, of course, you start yelling at your wife, saying, "Don't they know this is a one-way system?" It just gets worse and worse until eventually you decide "if you can't beat them, join them," and you turn around.

Well, it is the same in any one-way system, isn't it? It's the same in any one-way system in a city, the same in the New York subway system, and the same in the Underground in London. It doesn't matter which system you hit -- it's made to go in a certain way. If you try to go in the opposite direction you meet more and more difficulty and opposition. It becomes more and more obvious that you're going the wrong way.

Loved ones, those little man-made illustrations are just examples of a greater truth that our dear Father has built into this life of ours -- because this life only works one way. If you try to go up the down staircase in this life, if you try to live this life in a different way, you'll meet more and more opposition and more and more difficulties and you'll end up with torn nylons and packages all over the floor.

Now, that's the heart of what God is trying to teach us in the words that Paul quoted in Romans 11:10. They were words that God prompted King David first to speak. Paul is quoting David here in one of the Psalms. "Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs for ever."

That looks like such a terrible verse, but really it is because of God's love to us that he does that. It is, honestly. It's like one time I turned down the wrong opening on the freeway. It was so funny. It said first, "No Entry". Then it said "Stop". Then it said, "You're Going the Wrong Way". I thought it was really nice of them to keep putting it there for a dumb idiot like me. But that's what the Father does. That isn't a cruel verse. That's a loving verse. God said, "Let their eyes be darkened so that they can not see, so that they have to grab for somebody who can guide them. Let

their backs be bent forever so that they will realize that things are not right."

That's exactly what he did with Israel. You remember what a privileged position Israel had. God chose them out of all the nations to be the demonstration project for his fatherly love. You remember he took Abraham, the father of the Jews, way at the beginning and he explained to him, "I know you." He called him by his own name, and said, "I know you. I'm here behind the skies and I'm personal and real, and I'm your dear Father. I know you and I have a special position for you in this world. I will look after you as a father looks after you."

You remembered how he enabled Abraham to have many, many grandchildren and descendants, and how he enabled him to prosper and gave him money, cattle, and possessions and then gave his descendants a land beside the Mediterranean Sea and assured them that they were his special people that he would use to show the rest of us what a loving Father and what a careful God he was.

You remember what the Jewish nation did. They took that special position that God had given them out of all the nations, and they used it to lord it over the rest of the human beings in the world. It is interesting that you and I know thousands of Jews that are humble and friendly. But it is interesting that the nation of Israel itself is even today regarded as tending to be a proud and arrogant people. It is interesting that they have taken the position that God gave them and turned it around so that they are now regarded as an arrogant and proud people.

It is the same with the great abilities that God gave to Abraham and to his descendants for commerce and business. He gave them great cleverness and ability at gathering together money. And yet they turned away from God's plans for them and they used that ability -- that shrewdness and cleverness -- to get possessions for themselves, so that even though all of us know many Jews who are generous philanthropists and who are generous and kindly with their money -- yet the fact remains that today the nation of Israel is often regarded as a grasping, acquisitive nation that is shrewd and clever at making money.

The interesting thing is that their backs are bent -- that God has actually made that truth operate in their lives. As they have gone up the down staircase, as they have gone the opposite way to the one-way system, as they have declared themselves independent and shown distrust of God as their dear Father -- so he has brought about in their lives the truth of this statement, that their backs will be bent.

The interesting thing is that even though Israel has a special position among the nations, yet even to this very day, it is the nation that faces the most widespread contempt and suspicion from other nations. Despite all the attitude of many people who are Christians to try to influence the world's attitude to Jews, yet still the nation of Israel faces more contempt and more suspicion than any other nation. It's incredible, isn't it? Its back is bent because it has taken this special position that God gave it and used it for itself.

It is the same with the whole ability to gather money and financial resources. It is interesting that in this time of inflation no nation has probably as high a rate of inflation as Israel. {This talk was given in 1979.} The masses of income and money that it pulls in go out faster than they come in because they're spent continually -- in fact you might say, thrown away -- on guns and defense weapons.

So it's remarkable -- though we're talking about individual Jews, and it's important to see that --

yet, the nation of Israel itself has, in a sense, its back bent. Yes! It has its own land. But it's almost bankrupt maintaining its position in that land. And yes! It has its position among the nations. Yet no nation is treated with more contempt on a widespread basis by the peoples of the world. So, it's strange. It has got what God wanted it to have, but it got it by its own power and ability, and so its back is bent.

The other interesting thing is that its eyes are darkened too. You know that if you reflect for a moment – because Israel attributes its present position to being wrongly identified as the crucifiers of Christ. Actually they did crucify Christ, but we all crucified Christ. But there's a tendency still for Israel to think, "Our position of contempt and our position of vulnerability in the world is due to the fact that the world keeps thinking of us as the Christ-crucifiers." Or they keep attributing it to that incredible and incomprehensible neurosis which it calls anti-Semitism.

The interesting thing is, God's Word explains why its back is bent. Its back is bent because it has gone up the down staircase. Instead of trusting God as its loving Father and obeying him and then moving on to perceive the spirit of the Person who came in the first century as his Son, Israel has rejected God's plans for it and has striven after plans of its own.

The easiest thing in the world is for people like us to point the finger at the other fellow. While we're being so clever at perceiving the ways that God has bent Israel's back and darkened Israel's eyes because it refused to trust him, we need to have a look at our own lives. We need to see the ways that same principle is working in our own lives. In what way are you and I living unnaturally – because that's what it is when you don't trust and listen to your God as your loving father? In what way are we living unnaturally, and in what way are we paying the price for that?

Maybe the easiest way to point out one of our ways -- and there must be many in all of our lives -- is to remind you of Charles Dickens, the English novelist. You remember he wrote a book called David Copperfield, and one of the characters in it was a Mr. Micawber, who was always on the edge of bankruptcy and was always waiting for something to turn up. This is Mr. Micawber's lesson in economics to the young David Copperfield. "My other piece of advice, Copperfield, you know. Annual income: twenty dollars, annual expenditure nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents. Result: happiness. Annual income twenty dollars, annual expenditure twenty dollars and five cents. Result: misery. The blossom is blighted. The leaf is withered. The god of day goes down upon the dreary scene."

How many of us have done that? Instead of getting our dear Father's mind on the new cars or on the new clothes, or on the new house, we just are determined to have it. We storm ahead and we take on a payment, and then we take on another payment, and then another payment and then another payment and then another. Well, you know it -- until you have no salary left. You may as well just make that arrangement with the bank whereby they pay all your bills and you will receive maybe ten cents for an ice cream cone – though I don't think you can buy an ice cream cone for ten cents now.

Isn't that true? We experience a bending of the back under financial commitments that we take on independent of whether God thinks we need another car or more clothes, or whether in fact we can get on far better without those things. We believe in our hearts Paul's words: "My God shall supply every need of yours from his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." We believe Jesus' directive that we should seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all other things will be added unto us, for your heavenly Father knows we have need of these things.

We know that, but instead of going to him and saying, "Father, do we really need this thing? What do you think we need? What do you think is a reasonable commitment of our monthly salary?" We just drive on ahead up the down staircase and we are determined to run this our way. As sure as anything, God allows our backs to be bent by the burden that we take on.

Loved ones, you see how our eyes are darkened. Because how many of us have not been faced with that? We've faced that unbearable burden of payments that we couldn't make. And yet our eyes are so darkened that we will not trade down! "No! I mean, the car is too good. And now I've put this money into it. Or the house is too good. Or the other thing is too good."

And our eyes are so darkened that we're drawn on into the tunnel further and further. Indeed, our eyes are so dark that we start working out ways in which we could collate some of these amounts together, and maybe release some more money so that we could get into some more payments.

Loved ones, that is one of the ways God bends our backs and darkens our eyes. He does this to drive us into that desperate position where we will stop running our own lives and stop making our own judgments, and will begin to look to him as our dear God and allow him to be our Father and listen to his advice.

You can think of lots of other ways. One occurs to me immediately -- the talents and abilities that God has given so many of us. He has given every one of us a different ability or talent in order to bring his world more into the order of his will. That's why he gave it to us. But you know what we do. We take the talent or the ability and we begin to use it to establish our own status or our own importance in the eyes of our peers. So we begin to use that talent or that ability to parlay it into a more and more advanced position. So we try to struggle and manipulate our way up the hierarchical ladder of the company.

That's what we do. Inch by inch, we use this ability that God gave us to share his joy with the world, and to bring the world into the order of his will, and to serve the world -- and we make it serve ourselves. And we manipulate ourselves inch by inch up the ladder, until we manipulate ourselves into exactly that position that brings strain to us, and that we cannot hold on to, without strain and worry. And then we labor in that position.

We don't really like the job. But it has power and position and it has financial reward. We're not really using the abilities that God has given us. We bring the anxiety and the strain home each day and destroy our happiness at home. But we hold onto that -- like the little monkey that wants to get the candy out of the candy jar. He puts his hand in and opens it and grabs the candy, and of course he can't get his hand out of the neck of the jar. And he won't let go of the candy to get his hand out of the jar.

We're exactly like that. Our backs are bent with the burden of a position that we don't really enjoy. But our eyes are so darkened that we do not see that we're here to enjoy our lives, and enjoy the abilities that God has given us.

There is some place in this dear old world that needs our abilities. We may not get the same reward for them as we're getting at our current jobs. But we'll get satisfaction inside ourselves. Our eyes are so darkened and our backs are so bent that we cannot wrench ourselves out of that position.

Loved ones, that's the way that God deals with us. You see how kind he is? How much worse it would

be if he enabled us to do all those things without any of the bad consequences! The Father has lovingly designed this whole world so that whenever we go up the down staircase, whenever we start living it without him, whenever we start being God of our own lives, whenever we stop listening to his advice, whenever we stop regarding and trusting him as our own dear Father -- then our eyes become darkened and our backs are bent. It's God giving us the message, "My son or my daughter, this isn't the way I meant for you to live. Come on! Let's get together. Let's reason together about your life. Let me tell you what I plan for you to do in this life."

Loved ones, there is a beautiful way to live for every one of us. It is by beginning to have a real relationship with your dear God. He knows why he put you here. He understands you better than anybody else. He is your loving Father. He knows your first name. He knows what he has planned for you to do here. If you will just begin to turn to him and to close your eyes and speak to him to have a heart to find out what he wants -- he will begin to speak to you. That's why he's darkening your eyes at times and bending your backs to get you to do that. I just pray that if you know that there is something of that strain in your life, that you will turn around and get to know your dear Father.

Let us pray. Dear Father, there are many things in our lives that we see bring a blindness to us. At times we are groping and hardly know which way to turn. Often we don't know what we should do with our lives. Often we don't know what we should do with ourselves. Often, our Father, our backs are bent. We are not living enjoyable, lighthearted lives. Often we're living under massive burdens that we've pulled on top of ourselves.

Father, even though it's hard for us to thank you for those things, we do thank you. Thank you for showing us we are going the wrong way -- that we're not living the way you wanted us personally to live. So dear Lord, would you begin to speak to us, and we'll begin to pray each day, and we'll begin to read this Bible of yours. We ask you to begin to show us how we should live, and what your own personal plan is for us. We ask you to do that, if we'll begin to recognize you and acknowledge you from this day. We ask this for your satisfaction in our lives, and so that we ourselves would no longer have blind eyes and bent backs. We ask it in your name and for your glory. Amen.