

Faith or Feelings

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

[We have become aware] this time, not of outward sin but of inward sin. And then all those feelings that we had before usually disappear. And you remember, those of you who have gone through it, that there is only one answer to that inward sin, and that is to get 'self' fairly and squarely on that dear cross with Jesus where, in fact, it was put by God our Father. And so, many of us have to come through to that. We have to say, "Holy Spirit, what is there of me that is slipping off the cross? Or what is there of me that is not ready to die with Jesus? Or in what way am I still living for myself instead of for him?" And so, for many of us, that's a new experience of conviction of sin. And many of us have found, of course, that it's even a greater crisis than even our conversion experience was.

We all call it by different names. Some of us say, "Well, it's just full consecration." Some of us say, "Well, it's the fullness of the spirit." Some of us say, "Well, it's coming into a death to self." Some of us say, "Well, it's a second blessing." But whatever it is, all of us have found that when we actually deal with that inward sin by coming to a place where we rest with Jesus on the cross, and are ready to be nothing, and to be known as nothing but him, then there comes peace again into our hearts.

And again, it's a feeling! I mean, we do feel relief, tremendous relief, that at last we can do what we know God wants us to do. Finally we're free of that, "The good that I would I cannot do." And we have peace inside our hearts and a great sense of exhilaration, and a great sense of love for other people. You remember that hymn that says, "Sky above is deeper blue." And the grass is greener and all the flowers are more beautiful because you simply seem to be united with God, the maker of the world.

Now, loved ones, you wouldn't believe it, but that very state is a dangerous one. And yet I know we normally don't say that. We normally think, "Oh, that's a wonderful state to be in." But actually the state is dangerous because of the sheer power of those feelings. The feelings are incredibly powerful. The emotions are incredibly strong, and the reason it's dangerous is that emotions are not only in God's hands. Emotions are in all kinds of hands besides God. And you know that yourselves. If I said to you, "What turns you on?" You know that famous phrase, and if we think about it, I mean, all right, even if you think of it sexually, you think of it emotionally sexually. But normally we think, "Oh, it means everything." It could be drugs turn you on. It could be alcohol turns you on. It could be a nice guy, a nice girl turns you on. It could be classical music turns you on. It could be jazz turns you on. But the big thing is, we feel we're saying, "What raises or rouses my emotions?" And you know, therefore, that there are hundreds of different things that can stir your emotions. And yet many of us, after we're converted or even after we're filled with the spirit, are still emotional people. We are still very dependent on those emotions of peace or those emotions of exhilaration that God gave us as a result of our new birth or our dealing with him. And in that sense, we are 'sitting ducks' for any of Satan's instruments because he can get at those emotions very easily, not only through alcohol or drugs or jazz or all the other things but actually through somebody else coming into the room very depressed and despondent. If we are at the mercy of our own emotions, we're actually at the mercy of their emotions also. And the Father knows that.

And so you remember last day, we shared how soon after deep experience with God, you get up one morning and there is no sweetness in the prayer time. There is no sweetness. There is no sense of the glory of God. There is no sense of enjoyment. And you struggle through prayer. And you get up and you get into the car and you go out. And usually you're praising God and sensing his beauty and his wonder, and there's nothing! Nothing at all! It's all empty inside! And you get to the office and you find that there's a storm of criticism coming from the other people in the office. And usually you have a great spirit of love coming out from inside you, and there's nothing at all. Nothing! And you know what we do. We immediately say we've lost our position with God through some sin. And we begin to examine ourselves and ask for the Holy Spirit to show us. And that in itself is good. But many of us, when the Holy Spirit has shown us nothing, still go on turning the soil over and over again, introspecting more and more, going over the things we did, and trying to come up with some sin in our lives that causes this absence of God.

And loved ones, the fact is, it's just the dear Father himself has begun to wean you away from feelings and from emotions. That's it. God has just lovingly withdrawn from you your teddy bear. That's it. He gave you a few little teddy bears so that you'd sense how - what fun it would be in heaven. And now he's gradually pulling this teddy bear away. And most of us are like little babies and say, "No. I don't want to let go of it. It's soft and cuddly and makes me feel warm and happy." And he's pulling that teddy bear or that security blanket away. And that's really it.

And I think, to many of us, it should be reassurance that feelings are no proof that God is in your life and lack of feelings are no proof that God is not in your life. God is simply withdrawing from you a dependence on emotions.

And you remember we mentioned why he does it. He does it, first of all, to draw you to himself. That's one of the reasons. Isn't it very interesting? When you're feeling all the joy of the Lord and all that kind of stuff and filled with God's love, you don't work as hard to get close to God, do you? You kind of feel, "Oh, things are okay. Ah, well, I'll try to pray tonight if I can." But, boy, if there are no feelings at all there, you go for God with a vengeance. And often God does that. He withdraws the emotions from you because he wants you to seek him more intensely and more fully with all your heart, and it's to draw you to himself.

Often, it's to show you yourself. Often, it is. Often when you have all those great feelings -- yeah, you don't really know yourself terribly well, because anybody can do anything in the fullness of emotion. It would be surprising if you didn't want to go out and witness to everybody when there's a great sense of exhilaration within you. But when God withdraws that exhilaration, he sees if you really love him and if your will is really committed to him. And so he often withdraws the emotions so that you will begin to know yourself and not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. And often it's when you go inside, when there's no peace, no exhilaration, that you see who you truly are and you see who your God really is. And you begin to realize how committed to him you really are. So at times he does it to show you yourself.

At times he does it to separate you from your environment. And that's what we started with, you remember, the discussion, by saying the Father, loved ones, has to separate us from our environments. He just has to. And you know it. You know that situation in the office. You go into the office. It's a snowy morning and there's a spirit of depression and of criticism and of sarcasm in the office. And so often you'll go in all just up in Jesus and that stuff hits you like cold water and after half an hour in that office, you can't remember what you did during your prayer

time. You're just at the bottom of a pit of despair with the rest of them. And it's because our emotions are still under the control of our environment.

And that's really why often we can minister no life in situations. Do you know that? I mean, ministering life to people is really not just laying on them John 3:16. You probably know that. It isn't. It's not just laying on them the four spiritual laws. It's really being so confident that Jesus is in this room, that you know he has full control of everything. And you're in a spirit of relaxation and peace so that whatever happens in that office or whatever happens on that shop floor, you are at peace and rest and there's a light of peace that comes from your eyes. That is how you minister peace to loved ones so that whenever the panic breaks out in a situation, you seem to be at peace and you seem to be able to operate smoothly and efficiently. That's how you minister Jesus' life. But you know how easy it is to be overwhelmed by the atmosphere itself. And that's because the emotions are still more under the control of the environment than they are under your control.

Now, why that is, I think we've often shared. You remember this. [He puts up on the display a diagram of the personality.] It might even be that somebody hasn't seen, though I think the whole world has seen it. I did hear from somebody in Japan who knew - no, I didn't. But you remember how we've talked so often about how our personality is divided into these three kind of levels. They're not things. You can't dig down deep enough and find the spirit. Here's a spirit and here's a soul. It's not that. But there are three levels in which we operate as human beings. There's the level of the spirit and there's the level of the soul and there's the level of the body. [The diagram has 3 concentric rectangles. The outer is the body. The next level in is the 'soul'. The innermost is the 'spirit'.] And then as you follow through those terms, you remember you get them in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Well, if you follow through those terms in the scriptures, you begin to find that the spirit has these functions. [In the spirit rectangle are 'Communion', 'Intuition and 'Will'.] The spirit is able to commune with God. It's able to know by intuition what God wants it to know and what God wants it to do, and the conscience, then, constrains the will in the light of what the intuition of the spirit says.

And when you come into the soul, you come into the psychological part of us, or you come into the person or the being that joins the spirit with the body so the soul is pretty important. Your spirit can't get out to anybody unless it goes through your soul, but your soul is the part that is known as "psuche" in Greek, and that's what becomes "psuche logos" or psychological. It's the psychological part of us. [The diagram in the 'Soul' rectangle has 'Will', 'Mind', and 'Emotion'.] And what happens is, the will is constrained by the conscience, directs the mind, and then that in turn stirs the emotions and the body acts in relationship to that, and that is the way that we are meant to operate, just like that. We're meant to operate from God's spirit, from his love, through our own spirits, through our souls, and out to the world. That's the way we're meant to live. Now of course what happened, you remember, was we in fact refused to depend on God like that, refused to depend on his friendship, and we began to look to the world for the things that we were meant to get from God. We began to look to people and things for security and to other's opinions for our significance and to our circumstances for our happiness and the whole personality began to work the other way.

Now, can you see why the emotions are so dependent on the environment because almost from the moment we little souls are born, our emotions are affected by our environment? Those of you who are teachers presumably learned what I learned as a teacher. Even from the time in the mother's womb, the child is being influenced by the atmosphere and relationship between the two parents. So the

emotions are being influenced by the environment right from the earliest years. Now, there are several reasons for that. One is that the emotions are very tightly connected with the body so you feel the emotion of embarrassment and the old blood rises in your cheeks and you blush. Or you feel the old feeling of fear and the saliva dries up in your throat and in your mouth and you can't speak your mouth is so dry. So you can see your emotions are tied very tightly to your body. And your body is of course in direct contact with the world.

And loved ones, that's why the emotions are so vulnerable and that's why God wants to wean you away from depending on the signals you get from your emotions so that you know whether he is in your life or not, because he knows full well that your emotions can easily be stirred by all kinds of things besides him. Now, it is true that what he wants to get us back to of course is that. [Shows arrows from 'Will' to our mind, from 'Mind' to 'Emotions.'] He wants to get us back to the place where our emotions are controlled by our mind, and our mind is controlled by our will, and our will is controlled by our conscience, and our conscience is controlled by our intuition through our communion with God. [Again shows arrows from the 'Conscience in our 'Spirit' to the 'Mind' in the soul, etc.] And that's what he's beginning to work on you, to bring about. But his only way of doing it is initially to begin to get you to distrust your emotions. And that's what he does. He withdraws your emotions from you.

So loved ones, when that happens, don't be cast down. By all means, it is good to ask the Holy Spirit, "Holy Spirit, have I done anything that has caused Jesus to withdraw from me? Have I done anything that has driven the Holy Spirit from my spirit? Show me if I have." But loved ones, after you've examined honestly your own life before God, in the light of his word, and if he has said nothing, then thank him and go on rejoicing. Or if he shows you something, then deal with it. Repent of it. Stop doing it. Commit yourself to him, and go on rejoicing. But don't start looking around to see if the feelings have come back, because the whole purpose of God is to part us from those feelings.

Now, do you see that while you're operating like that, [Shows the arrows in from the world through the 'body' to the 'emotions' in the 'soul'.] you are at the mercy not only of every football crowd that wants to stand up and cheer? You're at the mercy of every television movie. You'll cry, without a doubt, every time you see "Little House on the Prairie." And you'll always get upset if there are upsetting people that come into your presence. You will.

And do you see what God's will is? God's will for us is that we would come to the place where we would be able to move into a situation and bring with us his life and his feelings and be absolutely independent of what is going on around us. In other words, God wants us in the place where -- well, I mean, it's the place that that old Paul talked about, if you'd like to look at it, in 2 Corinthians 6:4. "But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

That's it, that we should be able to go into any situation, however antagonistic and hostile the people may be, and whatever the chaos of the emotional life in that atmosphere is, that we should be

able to stand steady and firm and be what Jesus is saying to us to be. So that's his purpose, loved ones, in beginning to withdraw your emotions from you.

Now, there are several reasons for that. Most of us who live on our emotions are only good for God if he gives us a shot. That's right. We're only good for obedience if he gives us a shot. He can tell us to do something as long as he gives us a shot of exhilaration. We go and obey him as long as he gives us a shot of a feeling of love. We come up here and testify as long as he gives us a shot of joy. And the Father knows that while that's the situation, we are like little kids who will do things as long as our dad gives us candy, but in no way have we begun to come into the mature life of faith.

Now what is the mature life of faith? The mature life of faith is a life that is lived in your spirit by the exercise of your will. That's it. That's it. The mature life of faith is a life that is lived by your spirit, through your spirit, by the exercise of your will. In other words, there [He points to the 'spirit' in the diagram.] - in communion with God, you sense in your intuition what he's saying to you or what he wants you to do or through reading the scripture, he takes the "logos" ["word" in Greek] and he makes it a "rhema" [Greek word for "utterance" or "thing said". The New Testament uses it as 'a word from God'.] to you. He makes it his own personal word to you. Your conscience, then, constrains your will to obey that word. And your will directs your mind so that your mind understands it and sends out the necessary directions to your body to obey. And your emotions express the appropriate degree of love or joy that God himself is giving to you in his fellowship with you. That's it.

And that can be done at times with great emotion. Actually, emotion is neither here nor there. It can be done with great emotion or, believe it or not, it can be done with no emotion, with none at all. In other words, what God is after is our obedience. He is not after our great feelings. He is not after giving us a thrill every day we go to prayer. He is after people who love him and who have given their will to him in singleness of heart. That's it.

And you know, it's interesting if you talk to husbands and wives who have been on the road for some years together, they'll answer the same way. They'll answer, "Oh, yeah. Sure, we had a lot of feelings at the beginning and it was kind of fun but, boy, there have been commitments that we have made to each other during the past years that have had no feeling to them, but without those commitments, we would not have lived. And there is now a solidity to our relationship that bears no resemblance to the airy, fairy emotional relationship that we had at the beginning." Really, most people who have come into a deep relationship with a husband or a wife or a friend have an eventually come to the place when they realize what counts is, "Does this person really love me more than even themselves and will they do whatever needs to be done for me or to save or to protect me?" In other words, real friendship finally is based on the commitment of the will to the other person, on wanting the best for the other person.

And God knows that, loved ones. God wants men and women who love him because they love him. Not who love him because they have feelings of love or they enjoy the joy of his presence, but men and women who love him because they know he is truth, they owe him everything, and they have devoted their lives to him. And therefore at times in absolute in cold-bloodedness, they exercise their will and obedience to him.

And you know, when you think of people like Nee [Watchman Nee, 1903-1972, a church leader and Christian teacher who worked in China during the first half of the 20th century. In 1922, he

initiated church meetings in Fuzhou that may be considered the beginning of the local churches.] who was under house arrest, you remember, for years in China, or you think of men even like Solzhenitsyn [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 1918-2008, an eminent Russian novelist, historian, and tireless critic of Soviet totalitarianism.] who have gone through all kinds of agonies in the Soviet prisons, you know fine well that life with God must eventually come down to something deeper than feeling happiness and feeling pleasure and feeling peace. It must come down to a place where there is raw, cold-blooded obedience.

And of course, it's something we don't like. We do not like it. I think one of the reasons is because of Tiny Tim [1932-1996, born Herbert Khaury, an American singer, ukulele player, and musical archivist. He was most famous for his rendition of "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" sung in a distinctive high falsetto/vibrato voice.] and people like him. "If it feels good, do it." And the whole society that we live in is absolutely shot through with that. You know it. And everything, all TV commercials are based on feeling. All this business of why - why does a wife she's leaving her husband? Why does a husband say he's leaving his wife? "Oh, I don't feel love for them anymore." It's so dumb. But that's what they say, "I don't feel love anymore." They don't kind of see the lights going on and off! Or they don't feel the little thrill that went through their bodies the first time they met one another. And our whole society is shot through -- you know it -- with that feeling business.

How many of you have said - I know we mean - I know at times we just use the word, but how often we use the word and really mean what's behind the word? "Well, I 'feel' the Lord would like me to do this." Well, I know. Some of us really mean, "I believe the Lord would like me to do this." But some of us really mean, "I feel the Lord would like me to do this." "Yeah, I feel the Lord would like me to, maybe, give out tracts on Hawaii beaches. I just feel like that. Just think. I can just feel it on my face at the moment, the heat of the sun. I just feel the Lord wants me to do that." Or "I feel the Lord would like me to take a vacation." And you know it gets into subtler things. "Well, I feel the Lord wants me to move from this job." "No, I don't like the job too much, but I'm still at it. I'm not moving..." And we go on.

And really, our Christianity is shot through with these vague, vague feelings and very little to do with obeying God's will because the sad thing is, most of us have little idea how to find out God's will. Why? Because we're so utterly dominated by our feelings. And you know, some friends come up and they say, "Oh, we think you should do that." And you feel that affection for them, you feel that reliance on them, you feel they're your friends. And that's enough for you. You go out and do it. You don't know whether it's from God or not. And so many of us are all the time involved in moving by our feelings.

And so it is hard, loved ones. I think one of the reasons it's hard is in the 'feeling life', in the emotional life, there is a lot of self, you see. I think some of us fight against this idea that you should ever be without joy because joy is a kind of nice feeling. And we like joy. And old C.S. Lewis was good. He was, you remember, at that boarding school for years. And then he came onto this experience, you remember, with his prayer life. And I think you might [He puts the page from the book up on the screen, but it is not magnified enough.] - well, I don't know that you can read it. I'll read it to you. He begins, there at the top of the page:

"One reason why the Enemy found this so easy was that, without knowing it, I was already desperately anxious to get rid of my religion; and that for a reason worth recording. By a sheer mistake - and I still believe it to have been an honest mistake - in spiritual technique I had rendered my private

practice of that religion a quite intolerable burden. It came about in this way. Like everyone else I had been told as a child that one must not only say one's prayers but think about what one was saying. Accordingly, when (at Oldie's) - that was that school you remember he was at - "I came to a serious belief, I tried to put this into practice. At first it seemed plain sailing. But soon the false conscience (St. Paul's 'Law,' Herbert's 'prattler') came into play. One had no sooner reached 'Amen' than it whispered, 'Yes. But are you sure you were really thinking about what you said?' then, more subtly, 'Were you, for example, thinking about it as well as you did last night?' The answer, for reasons I did not then understand, was nearly always No. 'Very well,' said the voice, 'hadn't you, then, better try it over again?' And one obeyed; but of course with no assurance that the second attempt would be any better.

"To these nagging suggestions my reaction was, on the whole, the most foolish I could have adopted. I set myself a standard. No clause of my prayer was to be allowed to pass muster unless it was accompanied by what I called a 'realization,' by which I meant a certain vividness of the imagination and the affections. My nightly task was to produce by sheer will power a phenomenon which will power could never produce, which was so ill-defined that I could never say with absolute confidence whether it had occurred, and which, even when it did occur, was of very mediocre spiritual value. If only someone had read to me old Walter Hilton's warning that we must never in prayer strive to extort 'by maistry' what God does not give! But no one did; and night after night, dizzy with desire for sleep and often in a kind of despair, I endeavored to pump up my 'realizations.' The thing threatened to become an infinite regress. One began of course by praying for good 'realizations.' But had that preliminary prayer itself been 'realized'? This question I think I still had enough sense to dismiss; otherwise it might have been as difficult to begin my prayers as to end them. How it all comes back! The cold oilcloth, the quarters chiming, the night slipping past, the sickening, hopeless weariness. This was the burden from which I longed with soul and body to escape. It had already brought me to such a pass that the nightly torment projected its gloom over the whole evening, and I dreaded bedtime as if I were a chronic sufferer from insomnia. Had I pursued the same road much further I think I should have gone mad."

And many of us have got caught in feelings in our prayers because of self-love. And our prayers cease to be preoccupied with God, and they begin to be preoccupied more and more with our own realizations of God's presence. And I don't know if you're caught in that, loved ones, but I know I was. I know my prayers had become a burden to me, where I felt, "No, I'm not really in God's presence so I have to stay and I have to work up a feeling that I'm in God's presence. And then when I feel that, I'll be able to pray." And so self-love is one of the things, I think, that makes us try to hold on to our feelings and the emotions we feel.

Old Lewis goes on a little more and is a little philosophical about the difference between the object and the feeling, go up to the bottom of that page 218, just about here, you see:

"The surest way of spoiling a pleasure was to start examining your satisfaction. But if so, it followed that all introspection is in one respect misleading. In introspection we try to look 'inside ourselves' and see what is going on. But nearly everything that was going on a moment before is stopped by the very act of our turning to look at it."

Now do you see that? Whatever was going on inside has stopped the moment you've turned in because you've taken your eye off of what you are doing.

"Unfortunately this does not mean that introspection finds nothing. On the contrary, it finds

precisely what is left behind by the suspension of all our normal activities; and what is left behind is mainly mental images and physical sensations. The great error is to mistake this mere sentiment or track or by-product for the activities themselves. That is how men may come to believe that thought is only unspoken words, or the appreciation of poetry only a collection of mental pictures, when these in reality are what the thought or the appreciation, when interrupted, leave behind - like the swelled sea, working after the wind had dropped."

And then just go the bottom paragraph.

"This discovery flashed a new light back on my whole life. I saw that all my waitings and watchings for 'joy', all my vain hopes to find some mental content on which I could, so to speak, lay my finger and say, 'This is it,' had been a futile attempt to contemplate the enjoyed. All that such watching and waiting ever could find would be either an image (Asgard, the Western Garden, or what not) or a quiver in the diaphragm. I should never have to bother again about these images or sensations. I knew now that they were merely the mental track left by the passage of joy - not the wave but the wave's imprint on the sand."

I and think many of us get caught by Satan in that. We're worshipping God and we're like Thomas, my Lord and my God, utterly preoccupied with God, and that's true worship. And then this little mind thinks, "I seem to be in God's presence. I seem to...-- No, I'm not," because you're looking at yourself. And all you're looking at - and Louis is so good, you know - all you're looking at is the mental track left by the passage of 'joy'. In other words, self-love is often preoccupied with the 'joy', 'of the Lord'. And that's the way it is. Self-love is preoccupied with the 'JOY!' 'of the Lord'. That's it. But faith is preoccupied with the 'joy' 'OF THE LORD!' That's it. It's the difference between 'joy' or 'the Lord'. That's it. And Jesus wants us to walk by faith, by faith in him, and by obedience, independent of all feeling.

You were so good and I don't know whether you could read that stuff or not, but you seemed to be able to follow it in some way. Fenelon. It's a bit - all saints say the same thing, loved ones, doesn't matter which one you read. They all say the same thing. Fenelon, F-E-N-E-L-O-N, wrote the book Christian Perfection and was one of those dear old Catholic saints who knew more about the spiritual life than I suppose many of us will ever find out.

"We are tempted to believe that we are no longer praying to God, when we stop finding joy in prayer. To undeceive ourselves, we must realize that perfect prayer and love of God are the same thing. Prayer, then, is neither a sweet sensation, nor the enchantment of an excited imagination, nor the light of the mind which easily discovers sublime truths in God, nor even a certain comfort in the sight of God."

How many of us have been caught in that? "Oh, I must be praying well because I just saw some deep things!" And Fenelon says, "No, that's not what prayer is."

"All these things are the exterior gifts, without which love can exist so much the more purely because, being deprived of these things which are only the gifts of God, we will devote ourselves more singly and immediately to him himself. That is the love of pure faith, which torments human nature, because it does not leave it any support." And it does. We hate pure faith because it takes away our supports. It leaves us only with God, and that's a terrible person to be left with.

"It believes that all is lost, and it is thus that all is gained. Pure love is only in singleness

of will. Thus it is not a love of sentiment, because imagination has no part in it. It is a love which loves without feeling, as pure faith believes without seeing. We need not fear that this love may be imaginary, because nothing is less so than the will detached from all imagination. The more the action is purely intellectual and spiritual, the more it is not only reality, but the very perfection for which God asks."

And so, far from -- dear loved ones -- far from thinking that you're less close to God because you don't feel, it's very possible that you're more close to God because you don't feel, and because you still want to obey his will. This is the last piece and there it is. [Shows the place on the displayed page.] Maybe, you should start "If the imagination."

"If the imagination wanders," in prayer "If the thoughts are carried away, let us not be troubled. All these qualities are not the true man of our heart, 'the hidden man,' of whom St. Paul asks, 'Who is in the incorruptibility of a modest and serene spirit?' We have only to make good use of our free thoughts, by turning them always toward the presence of the well-beloved without worrying about the others. It is for God to increase, when it pleases him, this ability to keep the experience, of his presence." Do you see that?

"It is for God to increase, when it pleases him, this ability to keep the experience, of his presence. Often he takes it away from us to advance us, because this ability beguiles us with too much reflection." That's it. God often withdraws the feelings from us because he sees us beguiled with too much reflection, looking to enjoy the feelings more.

"These reflections are the true distractions," not the guy coming through the door, nor the noise in the living room underneath. It's the feelings that are the true distraction.

"These reflections are the true distractions which interrupt the simple and direct consideration of God, and which thus draw us back from the twilight of pure faith. We often seek a rest for our love of self in these reflections, and comfort in the evidence we want to give ourselves. Thus we are distracted by this ardent feeling, and on the contrary, we never pray so purely as when we are tempted to believe that we no longer pray. Then we fear to pray badly. But we should only fear to let ourselves yield to the torment of our weak nature, to philosophic infidelity, which always seeks to show itself its own accomplishments in the faith, indeed to the impatient desire to see and to feel in order to reassure ourselves."

And, you know, is that not the heart of it? Why do we look for the feelings to reassure ourselves? Why? To reassure ourselves of what? That God loves us? That he has forgiven us our sins? All that is written into history on the cross. All that can be read by us in the history books. That is written into the events of the universe.

You see, loved ones, we change our ground. We change our ground from faith in the fact of Jesus' death and his undoubted love for us and his words, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." We change our ground from faith to feeling. And we try to reassure ourselves with the feelings that we have. And it's meaningless, just meaningless. Our feelings tell us nothing about the facts. Indeed, as you see what God does to save us from our feelings, the one thing our feelings may tell us is that the facts are entirely different from what our feelings seem to be saying to us.

So brothers and sisters, I would encourage your dear hearts, you know, to begin the walk, to begin a

spiritual walk in your relationship with Jesus. And just to despise and abhor and ignore the whole business of whether the feelings are there. Sometimes they'll be there, sometimes they'll not. It doesn't matter one way or the other. And those of you who have begun to find that the feelings are not there where they once were, after examining yourself before God's word about your own obedience and your - the Holy Spirit witnesses your conscience is clear, then go ahead and thank God in faith and pray to him in faith.

And you know, many of us have had to do that for many months, without any consolation of God's presence. And remember, that's the word that old á Kempis [Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380-1471), priest, monk and writer] uses. All the dear saints know this stuff so well. He said, "On a certain morning, God granted to me the consolation of devotion." And that's so beautiful. I said - I don't know if I said it here so I don't want to say it too often - but it's such a dear word! A dear saint of God! One of the most perfect men, St. Thomas à Kempis, who ever lived, saying, "On a certain morning, God granted to me the consolation of devotion." In other words, God granted to him the comfort of being able to love God and know he was loving God. And yet you can see how many days and how many nights and how many years he was prepared to go without that, without that feeling. So it is, it's a solid way to walk and it's stable and above all, it's a position from which God can begin to send his own life to others through you. So it is precious. I would encourage you.

Any questions? You don't need to ask questions to please me, but - so there is, there is a dear way to walk that is free from Satan's work. We're going to fellowship after service. We're going to have it upstairs instead of down, so we will be up in the lounge, loved ones, and we'll have fellowship up there and you're really welcome, even if this is your first time. And maybe we can discuss some of the things and you can talk a little.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for the relief that it gives us to know that our feelings are neither here nor there. Lord, we know that it's easy to say that and we realize that it is going to take some working on your part and some obedience on our part and faith to be truly freed from the domination of our feelings. But Lord, we would ask you now to begin the work. We would say to you with so many of your saints, "Even if it kills me, take me through whatever is needed to bring me into a place of stability and fruitfulness in your ministry."

So Lord Jesus, we now, tonight, here on this Sunday evening in February, commit ourselves to you and say, "Do whatever you need to do. Bring to us whatever experiences or whatever lack of experience. Take from us whatever feelings you want or give to us whatever feelings you want. Allow whatever trials or difficulties to come upon us that you please, but Lord, do bring us into solid faith, free from these unreliable feelings that wreak such havoc in our lives."

And Lord, we do want to be people who obey you because we love you, who obey you because we have a single will to please you, and because we care about you and respect you more than anybody in the whole world. So Lord, we do. We want to come into pure obedience. And we thank you for the little encouragements that you've given us in our first months with you and our first years. But Lord, we do want to be grown children of yours. We do not always have to be bribed by you, and so we say to you, "Lead on, dear Holy Spirit, and bring us into the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ, our Savior." We ask this, Lord Jesus, because we know this is where you walk and we want to walk where you walk.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and forevermore. Amen.

