

Sermon for Sunday, February 18, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"LEARNING TO LIVE WITH GOD"

St. Luke 15:11-24

Text: "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" St. Luke 15:21

Today is the second in a series of five sermons on Learning to Live. Last Sunday we talked about learning to live with ourselves. We are our own greatest admirer and yet our own worst enemy. Until we can understand ourselves--who and what we are--we cannot live with ourselves. Next Sunday we are going to talk about learning to live with others. Man is truly man only in relationship to others and that is what the Bible means when it says in the creation story that God saw that it was not good for man to be alone. In the last two sermons we will shift gears. While the first three sermons will deal with personal relationships--to ourselves, to God, to others--the last two will deal with the two greatest facts of life, the fact that we live and grow old and the fact that we die. They will be entitled, "Learning to Live with the Years" and "Learning to Live with Death."

Today we will think together about learning to live with God. Man does not live by bread alone. In this universe in which we find ourselves living we are confronted with more than the merely physical. We keep running into the spiritual side of life. The older we get and the more of life we see, the more we realize that it is in man's soul--in the spiritual side of life--that the true values of our existence are found. Dr. Paul Tournier, the Swiss psychiatrist tells us that not only does man have an animal instinctive unconsciousness as Freud said, but that he also has a spiritual or higher unconsciousness. Now, when you repress something, it creates inner conflict which in turn leads to neurosis. Dr. Tournier says that our civilization today suffers from spiritual neurosis. He writes, "The cause of it is that our materialistic and amoral civilization no longer answers the deepest needs of the soul." He goes on to say, "The world tells him that feeling, faith, and philosophical truth are unimportant. And this same man cherishes at the bottom of his heart a justified intuition that these problems are nevertheless important. His thirst for love, his spiritual loneliness, his fear of death, the riddle of evil, the mystery of God--he no longer speaks of these things; he represses them, but still they haunt him." He illustrates this repression by telling of a communist who came to him on the condition that Dr. Tournier would not speak to him of God. "For a long time," writes Dr. Tournier, "I compelled myself to observe the prohibition he had imposed upon me; but he talked about God the whole time!"

No, the man who denies God and tries to live his life without God only represses the spiritual unconscious side of himself--and such repression leads to inner conflict, and inner conflict to neurosis. The man who is learning to truly live, is a man who is coming to terms with his spiritual unconsciousness--he is a man who is learning to live with God.

In our scripture this morning we read the familiar story of the lost Son. He is lost because he does not understand how to live with his father. For that reason his story is important to all of us because it is our story, too. We do not really know how to live with the Father. Notice in the first place that the lost son misunderstood the nature of freedom. As the son of a wealthy father he had more than most people. Yet, these things meant nothing to him. The reason they meant nothing was because of the restrictions his father put on him. No matter

which way he turned, he kept tripping over the "thou shalt" and the "thou shalt not" of his father. He kept wondering when he could be his own boss. After all, how is a young man going to make his own life and be a person in his own right if he keeps falling over the rules set down by an old man who doesn't know the score? He longed for the day when he could be his own man until finally he flared at the father, "I can't stand this constant training. I want to stand on my own two feet. I want to be free of your rules that keep hemming me in. I want to be able to do what I want to do."

So, his father gave him his part of the estate and he set out, light-hearted and free, on his own road. He did everything he wanted to do. He wore the best, ate the best, lived in the best. All his heart desired he got. In utter freedom and abandonment--in total disregards for any rules or regulations, he did as he pleased. And, like an insatiable sponge, his desires and lusts kept soaking up his life. And then one day he awoke to the bitter reality of a pig pen. There with the pigs he found that his stomach was empty, his goods were gone, his friends had vanished, and there was no one to care that he was cold and alone and hungry.

There in the pig pen he made a startling discovery. He discovered he was not free. He discovered that he was not where he wanted to be nor who he wanted to be. But he was not free. He had no choice. His circumstances were his master. Looking back on those last few months he made another discovery. He had never been free after all. No, he had been the servant of his desires. He had been the slave of his passions. His physical appetites had been his master. And, as he thought about it, he made a startling discovery. The restrictions that his father had placed on him had not been designed to take away his freedom, but to make him free truly. All the time he had thought freedom was doing as one pleased only to awaken to the chains of his own making. No, freedom was something far different. Real freedom lay in mastering one's self and not in becoming the toy of one's self.

Do you see? We take freedom to give in to our passions and break the moral laws of God, only to awake in a pig sty of broken and degraded character. We take freedom to break the holy laws of God, only to find ourselves victim of our own base desires and worse passions. No, real freedom is not to do as we please but as God pleases. Only there is real freedom. As Jesus once put it, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." A dope addict in the beginning was free to take drugs. But soon he is no longer free. Drugs have become his master. An alcoholic in the beginning was free to drink. But soon he is no longer free. Alcohol has become his master.

In learning to live with God we must understand the nature of God's holy laws. They are not mere prudish puritanism. They are not capricious, arbitrary rules. No, they are laws designed to make us truly free, to permit us to rise above our passions and lusts and desires and needs. Real freedom lies in mastering one's self rather than becoming the pawn of one's animal drives.

The second thing I would have you notice is that the lost Son carried his needs into his relationship to God. The son had many needs--he wanted this and he wanted that. He wanted to do one thing or another. And because his needs were so great he let those needs determine his relationship to his father--"give me what is mine and let me meet my needs. Give me what is mine and let me fulfill my desires."

See how it works. If my needs are carried into my relationship with God, my needs

will destroy that relationship. Suppose I have a profound need to be liked or admired. And suppose further that I carry this need into my relationship with the Father. What will I pray? Why, I will pray, "God make people like me." I will say, "God help me to be successful, or help me to do this thing well so that people will admire and respect me." Now, the fact is, God can't--or won't--answer that kind of a prayer. I have let my need to be liked determine what I want of God and if God doesn't do that then I become angry with God. My need has destroyed my relationship to the Father.

Does that make sense to you? We need to carry our needs to God and let him deal with them. Look at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. As he knelt there he had a need, a desire--he wanted to live. Suppose he had prayed, "God, Let this cup pass from me. I do not want to die. Keep me from terrible death." What would that prayer have done to his relationship to God? Instead, Jesus carried his need to God--he prayed, "Father, let this cup pass from me (that is, I pray for my life) nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." Do you see? He did not make his need a condition for fellowship with God. He brought his need to God, laid it at his feet, and trusted him. He was willing to let God deal with his needs on God's terms.

How about you? Do you have needs this morning? All of us do, do we not? What will we do with those needs? Will we say, "God meet this particular need in this specific way and I will love you?" That is letting our needs determine our relationship to God. No, we must take our needs, lay them at his feet, and trust him. When we do that we are learning to live with God.

The third thing we might note about the lost son was that out there in the pig sty he came to the end of his own rope. He never thought of going home until then. It never crossed his mind to go back to the father until he came to the end of his own rope. When he left home, everything seemed so great. Life was beautiful, life was to be lived to the fullest. Now it had ended abruptly against the fence of a pig pen. When he realized he was at the end of his rope, he turned his steps homeward. He was no longer worthy of the father's love and he knew that. He knew it because that was part of reaching the end of the road. He would go and tell his father that he was unworthy and ask him to make him as one of his hired servants.

Are you at the end of your rope this morning? You cannot learn to love God until you are. As long as you are content with yourself, as long as you are pleased with who and what you are, you cannot recognize your need that will drive you homeward. No, only when we reach the end of our own rope--only when we see how poor, how destitute we are, can we turn humbly to the Father.

There is one final thing to be said. As he journeyed homeward, the father was already waiting. His eyes were already searching the road. And when he saw the son a long way off he ran to greet him. It is so with God. He loves you this morning. You are his child. When you reach the end of your rope and turn to him, he is already waiting with forgiveness, with love, with open arms.

We are no longer worthy of the father's love. Learning to live with God is recognizing that. But as we turn our steps homeward, he is already waiting.