

Sermon for Sunday, March 11, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"LEARNING TO LIVE WITH DEATH"

Romans 8:28-39

Text: "What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us?  
He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he  
not also give us all things with him?" Romans 8:31,32

Today is the fifth and final sermon in our series entitled, "Learning to Live." Our first sermon dealt with learning to live with ourselves. Until a man is able to be honest with himself about who and what he is--and until he learns to be at peace with the limitations life puts on him, he cannot live very well at all. Our second sermon dealt with learning to live with God. Man does not live by bread alone. Until he learns to relate himself to that which is of ultimate importance, life has no meaning at all. Our third sermon dealt with learning to live with others. The Bible says that when God had made man he saw that it was not good for man to be alone. So we were made for community, for fellowship. Thus, until we learn to live meaningfully and well with the community of others, life can never fulfill its potential.

Last Sunday we sort of shifted gears and we talked about learning to live with the years. Man is caught up in the structure of time and the years keep rolling irrevocably by. Until he can face the approach of old age with a sense of triumph, the accumulating years will throw him into panic and despair. Today our subject is, "Learning to Live with Death". Life not only brings us years that rest heavily upon our shoulders, it also brings the tragedy and sorrow that goes with the death of those whom we love and cherish the most. When we are faced with the harsh reality of death, how shall we handle it and how shall we respond?

Let me begin by making several comments about sorrow. All of us here this morning have experienced sorrow in one form or another. The other day I was talking to someone in my study and he made a comment to the effect that he seemed to have so much sorrow in his life. I pointed out my study window to the houses across the street and replied, "You can walk down that street and ring every doorbell and you will find behind every door sorrow of one sort or another. Sorrow is common to all of us.

The first thing I want to say about sorrow is that it is intensely subjective. You are going to determine the nature of your own sorrow. Let me see if I can make that a little clearer. What is sorrow? Well, it is anything that frustrates what I consider to be my good or my welfare. It is that which affects me and the goals of my life adversely or badly. Sorrow will be that which hurts or harms or destroys that which is precious to me. That being the case, my sorrow is going to be determined by what is precious to me. My sorrow will be determined by what I love, by what I desire, by what is dear to my heart.

You see, the fact is, there is no such thing as objective sorrow or impersonal tragedy. Sorrow--real sorrow--is intensely personal and subjective. Now, I may have a sense of sorrow about some things. I may have a sense of sorrow about what has happened in Vietnam. But the person who has the real sorrow is the one who has lost a son or a husband in the war there. It is only as one is personally--subjectively--involved that he is truly touched by sorrow.

Let me take some other examples. Recently the papers have carried stories about a storm in Texas where many lives were lost, or earthquakes where thousands were killed, or street fighting in Ireland where little children are sometimes shot. Now, all of us feel a sense of tragedy and sorrow about those things. But the ones who know the true depths of sorrow are those whose lives are personally

touched by the loss of a loved one. Now, that is what I meant when I said that sorrow is intensely subjective and personal. I am going to determine what causes me sorrow by what I love, by what is precious to me, by setting my heart on a particular thing or person. Thus, if I love my children very deeply, anything that touches them adversely or harms them will cause me sorrow.

The second thing I want to say about sorrow is this: since we determine what causes us sorrow, we want to be very, very careful that the sorrows to which we expose ourselves are worth it. We want to be very careful that the objects of our affections are worth the sorrow to which they expose us. John Steinbeck, the author of the famous book, Grapes of Wrath, once wrote an article on the depression years of the thirties. He told of a man--his uncle, if I remember correctly, who lost all of his money except two million dollars in the crash of 1929. (That's pretty terrible, being down to your last two million!) And the man committed suicide! His excessive love of money exposed him to great sorrow when much of it was lost and his sorrow was so profound he could not handle it. Was that on which he had set his heart--was that which was most precious to him--worthy of such profound grief and sorrow?

Do you see? What I set my heart on today is the very thing that will break my heart tomorrow. The things we love and cherish; the things on which we set our hearts expose us to the possibility of sorrow. And we might just ask ourselves this morning, what are the desires of our hearts? What things do we love and desire and yearn for? Who and what do we love? Are they worthy of the risk to which they expose us? What do you want most of all this morning? Is it money? Fame? An expensive home? And if you don't get it, is it worth the sorrow it exposes you to?

Now, I am not saying that a person shouldn't expose himself to the possibility of sorrow. I am saying that the objects on which we set our hearts--the things that we let become precious to us--ought to be worth the risk.

Well! Having said that we determine the nature of our own sorrow by what we love and having said that we ought therefore to be highly selective about the things that expose us to sorrow, we have to go on to say that sorrow does come. And the problem that faces us at that point is how we will handle such sorrow. Especially, how will we handle the sorrow that comes to us in the face of the death of those whom we love the most; of those who are most precious to our hearts?

There are some bad ways we can respond. For example, we can respond with morbid fatalism. In the Old Testament in the days of Samuel, God told the young boy that he was going to destroy the sons of the High Priest, Eli, because of their wickedness. When Eli heard about it, he replied, "It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good." (I Samuel 4:18) That is, "I don't understand it and I can't or won't do anything about it."

Another inadequate response to sorrow is rebellion. This was the reaction of Job's wife when sorrow came upon them in wave after tragic wave. She cried out to Job, "dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die." (Job 2:9) When a loved one dies--particularly when it is a young person--we want to cry out in protest against God. Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian and philosopher of the 19th century, writes of his father in his journal. "How terrible," he writes, "for the man who once as a child, while herding flocks on the heaths of Jutland, suffering greatly, in hunger and in want, stood upon a hill and cursed God--and he was unable to forget it even when he was 82 years old." (Quoted from Soren Kierkegaard by Theodor Haecker)

Another poor response to death and sorrow is withdrawal from life and a flight

from reality. Lots of people try to run away from sorrow and try to avoid facing it. Look at Judas after he betrayed Jesus. He simply could not face up to the sorrow in his life after that and he went out and committed suicide. Hamilton Maule, in his book entitled Jeremy Todd, tells us the story of a young orphan boy who lives with his grandparents. The grandfather is the center of his world. He is the tower of strength, the fortress of power, the one secure and stable element in little Jeremy's life. But death unexpectedly strikes. The tower falls, the fortress crumbles. Jeremy cannot accept the reality of it. He lives in a world of fantasy--a pretend world where grandfather is only away, soon to return. He goes about to different places to meet his grandfather, refusing to speak of him in the past tense until his self-delusion almost destroys him.

Now, the fact is none of these responses to death and sorrow are either adequate or Christian. They simply do not meet sorrow on the level where it can be dealt with. In the first place, if the thing or the person over which we sorrow has been worthy; if the object of our love and affection has been worth the risk, then there is cause for joy in the midst of sorrow. I like to call it, "joy when you are crying". Let me illustrate. Suppose death were to take my wife. She has been more than worth all of the love and devotion I feel for her. The risk of sorrow to which I have exposed myself by giving my heart to her has been more than worth it. Now, it is true that sorrow has come, yet in the midst of it there is cause for joy. The joy of those 25 years cannot be destroyed. The wonderful memories so warm and fragrant, the precious little things we have shared, cannot be touched by death. The times we laughed and the times we cried; the times we struggled together for mutual goals--the failures, the successes--nothing can tear these from my heart. Though the storms of tragedy whip the sea of my soul into savage waves of sorrow, underneath the surface the deep places of love are calm and quiet.

Do you see? Joy when you are crying. I remember reading once of a man who had just such an experience. After the death of his wife, the one letter of consolation that pulled him through and helped him regain his sense of perspective came from a friend who wrote, "How fortunate you are! How I envy you those 36 wonderful years you had with Mary that death cannot take from you." Yes, sorrow that something precious and worthwhile has come to an end, but a deep appreciation and a quiet joy for that part which cannot be destroyed.

That is the first step in learning to live with death--joy when you are crying. The second step in learning to live with death is the hope we have in Jesus. We know that in Jesus death was defeated and the grave was overcome. (See such passages as I Corinthians 15, Romans 8, John 5:25, 6:40, 11:25, II Corinthians 4:14). The grave is not the final door closing forever on our loved one. No, it is a doorway to a new and glorious life--a new dimension of existence such as eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love him. Yes, we can live with death if we have the hope that it is not the end for the one we love.

Back in those early days the Christians were expecting Jesus to return very soon. Yet, as they waited some of their loved ones died. So they wrote St. Paul and their question must have gone something like this: "Paul, we know Jesus is coming again. We love him and try to live for him every day expecting him to come soon. But, Paul, as we are waiting, some of our loved ones are dying. What about them? How will it be with them when Jesus comes again?" And this is what St. Paul wrote in answer. You will find it in I Thessalonians, 4:13-14. "But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have not hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." Yes, the step of hope--that we may not grieve as others do who have not hope.



The third step in learning to live with death brings us to our scripture for today. St. Paul writes, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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."

Do you see? Nothing can separate us from God's love. We can live with death not because we understand or because it makes any sense to us. We can live with death because we know God loves us and we can trust him. George Matheson who was a famous minister of another century was engaged to a beautiful girl. However, it was discovered that he was losing his eyesight and he was soon completely blind. His bride-to-be broke the engagement and with his loved one gone and his world forever darkened, surely his heart was broken. Yet, in the midst of sorrow and tragedy he discovered that God's love would not let him go and nothing could separate him from the love of God. Out of this realization George Matheson wrote the words to one of our most beloved hymns, "O Love that Will Not Let Me Go." No, life may not make sense to me, but I can endure the sorrows of life and the loss of loved ones because life makes sense to God and I can trust him--I can trust a love that will not let me go.

Catherine Marshall, writing of the death of Peter Marshall, had this to say, "At one time I did not think life worth living without my husband. Yet I can testify that today I am truly happy....How did that come about?....I prayed that this tragedy which I did not understand would nonetheless 'work together for good.'" And then she wrote this, "And, as a final benediction, slowly imperceptibly there has come into my life the definite feeling of still being loved, cherished and cared for. It has become the most comforting and sustaining force of my life."

It will never be easy to learn to live with death, but it can be done. It can be done if the sorrow to which we expose our hearts has been worth the risk. It can be done if there is joy when you are crying. It can be done if we have a hope that death is not the end but a wonderful new beginning. It can be done if there is a love we can trust--a love that will not let us go. Yes, we can learn to live with death because whatever life brings, "slowly, imperceptibly there comes into our lives the definite feeling of still being loved, of still being cherished, and of still being cared for."