

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Around the World in 40 Days: Part IV What a Christian Can Learn From Confucianism*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
May 2, 2010

First Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-5 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Second Scripture Reading: Romans 12:9-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Confucius lived at a time of great turmoil. The culture was imploding, the nations were shifting. In brief, he lived at a time very much like ours. And so, the teaching of how to still feel like you're changing the world when things seem so chaotic, I think, is something that is helpful for all of us to hear. Confucius believed that you can change the world through virtue, not through power and coercion.

Whenever we lift up any text, including our own – any scripture, I've always thought of it as though you're looking for diamonds in a dumpster, filled with all kinds of disgusting food. When you lift up a scripture, any scripture, there are really some disturbing and disgusting things around it, and you have to get through them to pick out the jewels. If you're going to look for wisdom from around the world, first of all, there will be a lot that just doesn't make any sense, a lot that you just can't apply. If you stop looking for wisdom because you have to do some filtering, then that will be less fun than saying "some of this stuff just isn't going to make any sense. If you really want wisdom, you have to have a tough stomach, perhaps like a goat's stomach that can digest all kinds of things. So, when you read somebody like Paul, you get these beautiful lessons, but you'll have to keep from swallowing some of the things that you don't want in your life – things that, in a modern context, would probably no longer be what Paul meant.

As we listen to these words by Confucius, please don't trip up on particular phrases. Try to "mine" the diamonds that are here:

Third Reading: from the Analects of Confucius

*The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the Kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.*

*From the Sons and Daughters of Heaven to the rest of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides.*

I realized in the first service that this is not really like a sermon. It's more like reading a list of things. Hopefully, you'll stick with me on this. Some people don't even consider Confucianism a religion because our model of religion, in this culture, is so narrow. If there are no invisible people, no brainwashing of the children, no thinking we're better than other people, it doesn't count as religion.

What I'm hoping that happens from our tour around the world is that religion comes in all shapes and forms. One of my hopes is that if traditional Christianity is not working for you, you will realize that you can reframe theology around what your heart and mind says is true. There are lots of ways and different temperaments are going to need different ways to talk about the sacred.

The picture I hope you will paint in your mind is that of a bulls eye with outer circles, inner circles and concentric circles. What Confucius is going to say is that when the big parts of life are overwhelming, then to get a smaller context can help you to get your bearing. It's not that you don't care about the big, but sometimes if life is too frustrating, too maddening, if you get smaller, you get your sense of peace and balance in order to come back out again.

To use the image of these concentric circles, the first thing that all of us want to live in is universal principles. What makes a world teacher a world teacher is that they are talking about what is true for everybody. If it is only true for your group, it's not a great religion. One of the things that we have to challenge our traditionalist brothers and sisters on is that we've reduced Christianity down to a sectarian religion, and that's not good for anybody. A great teacher is talking about great principles that are true everywhere at all times.

Confucius says first that if you're going to illustrate these wonderful principles, you have to start with the state in which you live, the nation in which you live. When I first started preaching, I realized there is a lot of pressure for a preacher to criticize your nation's enemies. When people come to church, they are accustomed to ministers who tell you how communists should be, how the Taliban should be. That's a pretty easy gig. (Not a lot of Taliban here, not a lot of communists, probably) As fascinating as it might be to talk about how they should live in Uzbekistan, most weeks we're going to talk about how *we* should live. Confucius says you want to start there.

We love our nation, but we love our nation within universal principles. You know, I love Austin, I love living here, but if the City decided to attack the neighboring community of Hutto, I wouldn't support that. (*laughter*) Now think about that. If the City Council decided that we need to bring Democracy to Hutto, or we need sausage...Elgin looks like it's got a lot of terrorists there. Let's go get the sausage, and liberate them from those who oppress them. You can love your nation without hating the people outside the nation. But what happens when yours is the most powerful nation, and this is the history of humankind, you get a psychosis, and you believe that ethics do not pertain to you. And it's considered a great affront to try to hold your nation to the same principles that the rest of the world lives by. Confucius says we need to start there.

What you will learn, of course, is that you can get in complete control of that. You can have an effect on it, but you need something smaller to begin your impact. He says you begin by rectifying your families...which I understand is not going to work. You go in to rectify the family, and they say "who made you boss?" Let's say if you're going to change your nation, you must begin with your community, with your personal relationships.

That doesn't mean you give up on our political struggles, but when you're not getting along with your neighbors, it's going to be hard to make the whole nation right. So Confucius is reminding us that we live in these concentric circles.

Our personal relationships are very, very important. Have you ever noticed how you can almost tell that two people are married, because they're so rude to each other? (What?...Yes!...I'll be there!...O.K!) (*laughter*) They're married. I don't need to see the license. Think about that...we talk to the people that are closest to us in a way we would never, ever talk to anyone else. Confucius is saying that it starts there. Just simple civility.

I need to unpack that phrase about "the burning coals on the head." "If somebody is being nice to you, be nice to them because you'll heap burning coals on their head." (Romans 12:20) That doesn't sound too loving, does it? Here's what I think he's talking about in that passage:

In the ancient world, there was a symbol of repentance, where if I had been a creep, I would call the team together, and say "I just realized I have been an absolute pain," let's talk about it. So I would then sit in the middle of the room, in a chair, put a towel over my head, and someone would put a big, bronze bowl on my head. Then each of you would come with a burning coal and put it in the bronze bowl. I would sweat a lot, but I wouldn't be burned by it. And you would say what I had done wrong to you. In that process, all of us would say, "okay, Jim has suffered enough." You'd say whatever you needed to say, even if it took a long time, but at some point, there would be redemption. At some point, life goes on, and I think that is what Paul is talking about here. When you stop attacking and counter-attacking, it gives the other person a chance to catch their breath. We can justify ourselves forever if we feel that we are under attack. Every politician knows that all you have to do is teach people that they are being attacked and they will become mindless zombies. But if you ever look at the face of the other person and they are not attacking, at some point, you come to yourself. That is what both Paul and Confucius are saying, I think.

When personal relationships aren't working, when your family isn't working, when your community isn't working, then you start working with yourself. Realize when you can't control the relationships around you, to work inside yourself can be very helpful. Paul says "present yourself as a sacrifice for the world." How would you dream the world to be, and how could you live to make that more likely?

Confucius says there are two principles on which we can base our lives:

One is personal advantage – the American way, and the other is what is best for all – virtue. The advantage way is what puts me ahead – the Ayn Rand school of thought, enlightened self-interest. In this, we think that somehow all of us being greedy is going to work out into a big system. But what you discover there is that you're not even in control of your emotions, you're not in control of your career, you're not in control of your health. Sometimes you get emotions that you can't control. Confucius says "go into your heart." When you can't control the externals, you go into your heart.

I think when you meditate, when you do Yoga, when you pray, when you do those things to go inside your own heart and see what's there, it gives you great power. When we're hurt, when we're tired, and we neglect that...we just press on, a kind of cruelty creeps into our lives even though we don't mean it that way. When you get one nick after another, and every day it's the same thing, and you just press on, when you don't heal your own heart, it's very hard not to be cruel to other people.

What's being said there is to think of your heart like a garden that needs to be tended every day. When that doesn't work – this is the lynchpin of what Confucius and the Stoics say – it's what you say to yourself is what's going to get all of those outer circles going. If I could put a helmet on your head and it would project

your thoughts onto the wall, none of you would wear it. If we could hear what each is saying to themselves, can you imagine how ugly that would be? Most of us say things to ourselves that are absolutely vicious. (“You stupid fool! You did it again! How many times have you missed that exit? I told you that!”) Can you really take charge of what you say to yourself? Now, I may not think I’m in control of that, but the only reason I’m not in control of it is that I don’t take time to settle down and realize that I’m talking to myself all the time. Talking – it’s not just happening. It feels like it’s pre-recorded. Some of it is! But, the lynchpin of your life, of your mind, is what you’re saying to yourself each moment, and it’s almost like we’re in bumper cars...we focus on everything but that, and can’t understand why we can’t get it together. To spend time...how many of you would just load information on a computer without any sense of what it was worth? Nobody would do that, especially if you didn’t know if it had viruses, and that sort of thing. You buy software to protect your computer, but do you protect your heart by protecting what your mind says?

Realize that when you sit in front of a television, that’s programming a computer inside of you, and that you will live with the reverberations of that moment. I think it’s a very empowering truth that Confucius shares with us, but it needs to be what he calls “sincere thought.” I would guess that as a Christian, you have been taught not to do that. I would guess that you were taught to believe and not to think...to believe that there is an angry, invisible person [God]. If you ever think or question, you risk this “tissue-thin” faith that will dissolve, so don’t think about it, don’t ask questions, just have faith.

What Confucius teaches, and what Jesus teaches, and what Paul said was “whatever is good, whatever is true...think on those things.” Why would he say that if he was just wanting you to become a parrot and just memorize phrases? It is that sincerity of thought that the world needs so desperately. If you’ve been taught to pretend to be something that you’re not, or to think something that you’re not, it’s a calling to go back into that authenticity.

But to protect that, there’s one more step, and that is to broaden your learning. One of the things that happens in life as we get older, is, we narrow our spectrum and we go toward the things we already know. We seem to think it sounds stupid if we don’t already know it. “That’s stupid, because I never heard it before.” And we narrow our study, and we get more and more irritable. We digest less and less of life, and that is a recipe for spiritual disaster. As you get older, if you narrow your comfort zone, there will be something to disturb your peace every moment. It may just be a fly. Have you ever been meditating, and a fly comes in the room? (“Oh, great, oh great...now I came out in the woods to get away from these distractions, and a fly comes in!”) Something will disturb us, but to broaden it, go outside, turn off the television – it’s not a true experience. It’s okay to do that some of the time, but when you’re trying to get your balance, use reality, not creeds, not philosophy...reality! Look at the grass, look at the sky...talk to real people and you will get a bearing that will be a foundation from which you build everything else.

Now let’s look back and see if we’ve got the whole train going here. This is the bulls eye:

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Like Confucius, you were born in a time of great change and turmoil. Every understanding is tottering now. The exciting thing is that just like Confucius, you can live by principles. Know that no matter how tumultuous your world is, you begin to change the world when you change yourself.

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*Part IV: May 2, Confucianism, Romans 12:1-5, 9-11, Analects of Confucius*

*Part V: May 9, Native American*

*Part VI: May 16, Judaism*

*Part VII: May 23, Islam*

*Part VIII: May 30, Can Atheism be "Spiritual?"*



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That doesn't mean you give up on our political struggles, but when you're not getting along with your neighbors, it's going to be hard to make the whole nation right. So Confucius is reminding us that we live in these concentric circles.

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I think when you meditate, when you do Yoga, when you pray, when you do those things to go inside your own heart and see what's there, it gives you great power. When we're hurt, when we're tired, and we neglect that...we just press on, a kind of cruelty creeps into our lives even though we don't mean it that way. When you get one nick after another, and every day it's the same thing, and you just press on, when you don't heal your own heart, it's very hard not to be cruel to other people.

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