

THE FAVORITE TEXT OF FAMOUS PEOPLE - Norman Vincent Peale

**“The Source And Secret Of Creative Living”**

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Jn. 1:1-4; 10:7-10

One of the marks of true greatness in a man is his taking time for little people. Nothing reveals the actual smallness of an individual, however rich or famous he may be, as his unwillingness to pay attention to “just plain folks.”

To “walk with kings and keep the common touch” is so much the mark of maturity Rudyard Kipling listed it among those things he said truly make a man. That Norman Vincent Peale possesses that quality is evidenced by the fact that though he is known around the world as a friend of the great and near-great, and carries a schedule that would make even the strongest groan, he took time one day to write this letter,

“Dear Dr. Lavender,

I trust you will pardon this long delayed reply to your very good letter of August 5.

As my secretary explained, I was in the Holy Land and Europe and have only recently returned. I am highly honored to be included among those whom you wish to quote.

May I say I have many favorite texts, but I think the one which has meant the most to me is John 10:10.

‘I am come that ye might have life and that more abundantly.’

I first learned to love this text because it was a favorite of my father, who was a Methodist pastor in Ohio. From my earliest childhood, I heard it referred to again and again. He preached many sermons on it.

My father taught me that Jesus Christ teaches us to have life here on earth while we are alive, in the flesh, and that through faith in Him we have life in eternity after our earthly life is finished.

When I preached my first sermon at the Methodist Church in Walpole,

Massachusetts, on April 3, 1921, it was only natural that I would use as my text the passage from John 10:10 which had become so dear to me. It formed a sort of theme of my ministry and I veritably believe that if I could know in advance when my last sermon would be, I would preach it on that text.

One of the greatest desires of all human beings is for life which means, of course, vitality, energy, love, hope, faith, goodness and service; and this kind of life, life of this quality, can be found only in Christ.

Then by so believing and so living, we can enter into eternal life through the spiritual work of our Savior.

I extend to you my very best wishes, and to your people also. May God bless you and them, and I hope to see you one of these days and have a good visit.

Faithfully yours,

Norman V. Peale.”

The verse which the famous pastor of his famous church has selected as his favorite text divides itself into three parts,

A main clause, “I am come.”

A dependent clause, “that ye may have life.” And --

A descriptive clause, “and that more abundantly.”

Now it isn’t my intention to make this a lesson in grammar this morning. Any of you who know me well are aware that, in matters of English, I am “the chief of all sinners.” But I have indulged in this simple bit of sentence dissection because I think it will help us see more readily, why it is that so many people fail to find the satisfying life for which they are seeking.

### **Looking for Life in the Wrong Way**

Written into the very nature of Norman Vincent Peale’s famous texts are both the source and secret of abundant life. The source is revealed in the main clause, “I am come,” about which Dr. Peale preaches with such eloquence. The subject is Jesus. The secret lies in keeping the second

half of the verse subordinate to the first. That is, keeping life and our pursuit of it, subordinate to Jesus and our pursuit of him.

This is necessary if we would be grammatically correct, for the words, “that ye may have life” form a dependent clause which cannot stand alone. It requires a main clause, “I am come,” to support it. But in this instance, it is not only true grammatically, but theologically and actually.

Apart from Christ, who *is* the life, there can be no life. To pursue *it*, without first pursuing him, is to engage in an exercise of frustration and futility. Life demands Jesus. The dependent clause must have the main clause to give it meaning.

That people are interested in possessing life goes without saying. “Next to God, life is the biggest word in the human language,” according to John Henry Strong.

“It is more than repentance and faith; more than love, joy and peace and all the fruits and spices of the spirit. More than reconciliation and redemption for it includes all of these. Life is a vast composite. It bears in its bosom all that God purposed for us in creation, all that humanity has lost through sin, all that will be restored when Christ’s victory is complete.”

Of all the deep-rooted yearnings in the human heart, the yearning for life is by all odds supreme.

Life is the first treasure we receive and the last we surrender. Between this alpha and omega of human experiences lies a broad spectrum of events which often delight us, sometimes disappoint us, but whether good or ill, rarely fail to bewilder us.

Have you not often been just as astounded by your successes as by your failures? A tourist was traveling through the state of Maine and stopped a native to inquire, “How far is it to Portland?” The native cogitated for a minute and then responded, “The way you’re headed it’s about 25,000 miles. Turn around and it’s only two.”

All of us get turned around at times, don't we? We come to periods when we don't know which way to go. We lose our sense of moral and spiritual direction. We fall into an aimless drift like a ship at sea without a rudder. We begin to wonder if we really matter after all.

Because life is the big word in our vocabulary, the titanic question of our time is,

How can I live, here and now, in a way that has direction and meaning?

How can I be sure that I matter? That I belong? That someone cares who

I am and what I do?

A four-year-old cockney lad described what I sometimes feel is the central sadness of our age. His parents had been killed during the London blitz. His home had been destroyed. All ties with family and friends had been lost. As a precaution he was evacuated to the countryside where conditions were safer. Attempting to help him, a Red Cross nurse lifted him up in her lap and said, “Who are you?” The little lad responded, “Ma'am, I'm nobody's nothin'.”

Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever find yourself searching for a sense of worth and belonging? Seeking for some purpose and direction to life? If so, I have good news for you.

You can be Somebody's Something!

You can be God's child.

You can be a child of the King.

You can be an inheritor of all the treasures of his Kingdom.

You can live victoriously.

You can find rhyme and reason in life.

You can discover not only a purpose, but the power to achieve it.

The secret lies in putting first things first. In keeping your longing for life subordinate to your love for the Person who came to make it possible.

The problem of most people is not that they don't know how to live, although that may be true.

Their problem is that *knowing* they don't know how to live, they set about learning in the wrong

way. Their difficulty lies in the fact that they are more concerned with life spelled with a capital “I” than with life spelled with a capital “L”.

In other words, they have put the subordinate clause in our text ahead of the main clause. They have fastened their interest and attention on the *purpose* of Christ’s coming, instead of on the *Person* who came to make that purpose possible.

In their egocentric search for satisfaction -- and in the last analysis is not egocentricity the hard core of sin, this business of being all wrapped up in me and mine? -- in their egocentric search for satisfaction, they have turned in upon themselves more and more, until they have shut out the One who is the source of all satisfaction. They are like the man who, when asked whether or not he belonged to a church, responded, “No, no. I belong to nothing. I belong only to myself, and I suffer.” That precisely is the problem of many of our contemporaries. They belong only to themselves, *and they suffer*. They have not discovered the truth that life is found only by losing one’s self in a love affair with God.

So many problems result from forever living life in the first person. Bob Hope, in his inimitable fashion, gave an expression of this when he said,

“Today my heart beat 103,369 times. My blood traveled 168 million miles.  
I breathed 23,040 times. I inhaled 438 cubic feet of air. I ate three and a  
quarter pounds of food. I drank 2.9 pounds of liquid. I perspired 1.43 pints.  
I gave off 85.6 degree of heat. I generated 450 tons of energy. I spoke  
4,800 words, moved 750 major muscles, my nails grew .00046 inches and  
my hair grew .01714 inches. I exercised 7,000,000 brain cells. Boy, am I tired!”

And he would be if, in truth and not in jest, he lived so self-conscious a life.

Some people *do* live that way, and they are miserable. By putting themselves everlastingly at the center of things, they inevitably wind up with “I” trouble, the worst trouble of all. The dependent clause, “that ye may have life,” will not stand alone. It requires the main clause, “I am come,” to

give it meaning.

Another way of living which also leads to regrets is assuming that pyramiding one's material possessions can prove satisfying.

Now let's admit that when one gets down in the doldrums, a new hat, a new tie, or as in my case, a good shoeshine, give one's spirit a lift. Let us also admit that enormous amounts of money are spent for entertainment that does not entertain, food that does not nourish, and appearances that do not really improve.

The assumption is that, if a few things bring a little happiness, many things will bring much happiness, is wrong. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There are many who have lived just long enough to discover that some of the things that seemed so enticing when they were being sought, have lost much of their allure when they have at long last been bought. The dependent clause, “that ye may have life,” will not stand alone.

Looking for life in the wrong way is not the only reason folks miss out on life. Some fail to find it because they are --

### **Looking for Life at the Wrong Time**

They forever put the quest off till tomorrow. Nels Ferre, in his book, Making Religion Real, tells how, for several days, his little daughter Faith came to her mother asking anxiously, “Mama, is this tomorrow?” Mrs. Ferre would answer tenderly, “No, dear, this is today.”

One day she answered, “Darling, tomorrow never comes. Each day, as it comes, will always be today.” The little girl's face fell. “But Mama,” she said, “Mariel and Kerstin promised me a popsicle tomorrow if I picked up their clothes. Everyday they say to me, ‘You can't have it today, dear, this is not tomorrow.’” So every day the child had waited for her sisters' reward on a morrow that would never come.

We can all sympathize with little Faith because most of us remember childhood experiences in which we were taunted by similar tactics. But now that we are grown, and know that yesterday died last night at midnight, and tomorrow never comes. It is sad indeed, that we persist in putting off the business of learning how to live *today*!

But for me to point out our folly is not enough. Telling a man he must stop putting life off is like telling a blind man to stop stumbling over things. Or a lame man to quit limping. His problem is that he doesn't know *how* to live for today, and is often confused by the conflicting advice of the voices that would teach him.

Probably you can remember, as I can, sitting in a crowd of people at a football game and watching the bewilderment of a poor pooch who inadvertently wandered onto the playing field. From every angle come the sound of voices as people called to him. But there was no *dominant* voice, so he races about, helter-skelter, in wild confusion.

Perhaps you are like that. Perhaps you have been listening to the sound of many voices, a veritable babel of them, calling, “Here wisdom lies. Here rest and peace are found. Lo here! Lo there!” And you are confused, because there is no *dominant* voice. You are not alone.

“The world is weary of new tracks of thought that lead to naught,  
Sick of quack remedies prescribed in vain for mortal pain.”

But I say to you,

“Above them all one figure stands with outstretched hands.  
One voice sounds above the strife saying,  
‘I am the way, the truth, the life.’”

My friend you can find life if you make it your aim first, last and always, to know Jesus only.

In the passage which was read earlier this morning, John says,

“In *him* was life, and that life was the light of men.”

There can be no satisfying experience of life apart from Christ. Life will only work out one way,

and that God’s way, through Jesus!

As I pointed out in the beginning, written into the very structure of our text is a main, and a subordinate clause. Without the first, the second has no significance. The phrase, “that ye may have life,” will not stand alone. It is a dependent clause and requires the glorious truth of the main clause, “I am come” to give it meaning. The *purpose*, life and that abundant, is not attainable without the *Person* who came to make it possible.

Life is never built on an idea, but always on a person. As George Eliot points out:

“Great ideas dazzle us without actually laying hold upon our minds, but when they appear in a personality we love them, and take them to our hearts.”

To give a negative example, fascism was built not on an idea, but upon the weird magnetism of a man called Mussolini.

Nazism gained a foothold in Germany and fanned a flame which nearly consumed all of Europe, not because it made sense as a way of life, but because of the powerful image of a shrewd man, Adolph Hitler.

Communism has fired the imaginations of men’s minds, not so much as a great philosophy, but as the philosophy of a great personality, Lenin. He gave it substance and made it live.

In a similar, but much more significant way, the abundant life for which you are looking and longing, lies not in the many great ideas which the fertile mind of Jesus produced, rather it is to be found in the personality of Jesus Christ himself. “In *him* was life,” said John. The source of abundant life is a Person. Apart from him, your attempts at living will be sterile and unrewarding.

It has been said that on the day Michelangelo finished his statue of Moses he stepped back to study his work. For the first time he viewed the completed reproduction of this great legislator of the Jews. What he saw overawed him. Every feature and suggestion of movement was as strong and majestic as the granite in which it which it had been carved.



So real was this masterpiece, in a burst of enthusiasm and with a tone of eagerness, Michelangelo struck the base of the statue and cried, “Speak!” But, of course, Moses did not speak. It was just a statue. The life of Moses only *seemed* to be real. The apparent reincarnation was mere illusion. Life, you see, is an internal quality, an *imparted* energy which only comes from life itself.

That’s why people need Jesus. All other prophets *point* the way to the truth and life, but Jesus says, “I *am* the way, the truth, the life.”

Sensing that statement to be true, on one occasion Peter responded to Jesus’ question regarding the disciples’ future course by saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? *Thou alone* hast the words of eternal life.” Peter knew by inspiration, what scientists have since learned by investigation. Life comes only from life. Spontaneous generation is impossible.

Fulton Sheen expresses it eloquently --

“Life is not a push from below, but a gift from above.  
Human life is not a perfection of animal life,  
It is an imperfect presentation of divine life.  
There is no spontaneous generation in this world,  
Either naturally or supernaturally.  
Life must come from life.  
When we return to it, we live,  
When we depart from it, we die.  
And that life, the divine life, the only life,  
The life which all seek, many without knowing it,  
Is the life of God, the life wherein all life rests.”

On numerous occasions we read in the New Testament that Jesus was alone. He was alone in the garden. He was alone in prayer. He was alone in the temple. He was alone in the wilderness. He

was alone before Pilate. He was alone on the cross.

But there is another kind of aloneness which the gospels attribute to Jesus, the aloneness reflected in his person. It was this aloneness, this uniqueness of character, which caused Charles Lamb to express the thought that we can compare every great and good man who has ever lived with another man just as great and just as good, until we come to Jesus Christ. Then we discover there is none so great and none so good.

He stands alone. He stands alone in the beauty of his life. He stands alone in the wisdom of his teachings. He stands alone in the purity of his speech. He stands alone in the majesty of his work. He stands alone in the kind and quality of life he offers. He stands alone in his ability to keep the promises he makes. Jesus is the Great Unlike. He is the one person, in all of history, who shines sublimely above the rest.

An author, unknown to me, has written,

“When Mohammed sees a soul lying at the foot of the hill of difficulty he  
exclaims, ‘It is the will of Allah.’

When Buddha sees a soul at the foot of the hill of difficulty, gazing wistfully  
toward the temple beautiful at the top of the hill, he says, ‘When you pass  
through a thousand incarnations, you may begin to climb the hill of difficulty  
toward the temple beautiful.’

When Confucius sees a soul lying at the foot of the hill of difficulty, he says,  
‘If I had seen you before you fell I could have told you how to keep from falling  
down the hill.’

When Jesus of Nazareth sees a soul lying at the foot of the hill of difficulty,  
he hastens down the hill, throws his arms of infinite tenderness and love about  
that one, bears him to the top of the hill, and together they enter the temple  
beautiful, the man leaping and walking and praising God.”

It is this quality, this capacity to redeem, that sets Jesus apart and makes him different, yea,

indispensable! For life comes from life. To possess it, we must possess him. Life with Christ is an endless hope. Life without Christ is a hopeless end!

Homer Hock has some expressive lines which, when paraphrased slightly, apply beautifully to this One who towers above all citizens of time.

“There is no new thing to be said of Jesus.

There is no new thing to be said of the mountains, or the stars, or the sea.

The years go their way, and the same old mountains lift their granite shoulders  
above the drifting clouds.

The same silent stars keep holy vigil over a tired world.

The same mysterious sea beats against the shore.

But to mountains, and to stars, and to sea, men pay their unwearied homage.

It is thus with Jesus. He is mountain in grandeur of soul.

He is star in fidelity of purpose.

He is sea in the mysterious voice of loneliness.

And he abides!”

“I am come, that ye might have life, and that more abundant.”

Would you share in that experience of abundant life? Then I urge you to remember that that life comes from *the* Life. It is dependent upon the person of Jesus Christ. Seek him and you seek life. Know him and you know life. Find him and you find life. Life at its fullest. Life at its best. Life which grows sweeter, as the years go by. And then . . . Glory!