

HOW TO START A CHURCH FIRE

10 STEPS TO BUILDING A
STRONGER CHURCH

Paul W. Powell



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Dedication

*to my grandson
Mathew Kallas*

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Introduction

In 1836 a pioneer preacher named Z. N. Morrell migrated from Tennessee to Texas. For the next 46 years he would be a traveling missionary for Texas Baptists. He rode horseback, swam swollen rivers, braved Texas “blue northers,” outran or out-fought hostile Indians, preached to people wherever he could find them, and organized converts into cooperative Baptist churches.

From the moment he crossed the Sabine River he caught a vision that Texas would one day be a Baptist stronghold. The text of his first sermon and the golden text of his life was Isaiah 35:1: “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as a rose.”

Texas did blossom as a rose and became all that Morrell envisioned and more. It grew until one in seven churches in the Southern Baptist Convention were in Texas and one out of every seven dollars given to the Cooperative Program were Texas Baptist dollars.

But somewhere along the way we lost the vision, zeal, and dedication of Morrell and his counterparts, and Texas has reverted back to a mission field. Although we have almost 5,000 churches, most of them are small (71 percent of our churches run 100 or less in Sunday School) and 56 percent have either plateaued or are in decline. All the while people have been flooding into Texas, until we are now the second most populous state in the nation. Percentage-wise we have fewer churches today than we had in 1900.

If we would win our state to Christ it is obvious that business as usual will not get the job done. We must build

more and stronger churches. I have written this book to encourage both.

I've chosen the name *How to Start a Church Fire* because the church is the only movement Jesus left on earth to represent him. If, therefore, we would advance his kingdom we must strengthen the churches we already have and they in turn must establish new churches where they are needed.

Our state leadership is committed to this great work and so, too, am I. It is my hope that you will be committed to it also.

Lt. Governor Bob Bullock includes in each correspondence he sends a small stick-on flag of Texas with the prayer, "God bless Texas," printed across the bottom. I have that flag on a folder I look at almost daily. But more than looking at it, I have made those words my daily prayer. I'm persuaded God wants to bless Texas but he is most likely to do that if we concentrate on strengthening our churches. To do that there are some things we absolutely must do. If you'll walk with me through these pages I'll show you what I believe them to be.

Paul W. Powell
Tyler, Texas

Chapter 1

Awakening: Why Sit We Here Till We Die?

2 Kings 7:3-9

A prominent West Texas rancher-oil man had a homely looking, unmarried daughter. In hopes of finding her a husband, he invited all of the eligible bachelors in the county to a barbecue at his ranch. As they gathered around the swimming pool for the festivities he made an announcement. He said, “This swimming pool is filled with man-eating sharks and anyone who will swim across it can have the hand of my daughter in marriage and one-half of my vast fortune. Or, they can have \$1 million in cash.”

He had hardly finished his announcement when there was a splash and one of the men went swimming across the pool, lickety-split. As he climbed out on the other side, the rancher rushed over, shook his hand, and said, “Son, congratulations! I suppose you would like to have the hand of my daughter in marriage and one-half of my vast fortune?”

He said, “No, I don’t want that?” The rancher said, “Well, then I suppose you would like the \$1 million in cash.” He said, “No, I don’t want that.”

“Then,” asked the rancher, “what would you like?”

He said, “What I’d like is to get my hands on the fellow who pushed me.”

Sometimes we need a push in life. That’s what I want to give today. This push comes in the form of a question. It

is this: “Why sit we here till we die?”

This question was first posed by four starving lepers who sat outside the gates of the city of Samaria. Leprosy was considered the deadliest disease of the ancient world. It was thought to be highly contagious and before modern medicine it was incurable. Isolation was the only way known to deal with it. So these lepers were forced to live in leper colonies outside the city. They could, under certain conditions, go inside to buy food or occasionally family members brought it to them. But in this instance their situation was complicated by the fact that Samaria was under siege. King Ben Hadad of Syria had laid siege to the city, cut off its food supply, and it was slowly starving to death.

As the food diminished, inflation set in. Exorbitant prices were charged for the most unsavory kinds of food. Some people even resorted to eating animal refuse and to cannibalism, to eating their own children.

Sitting outside the gates, starving, the lepers pondered their fate and weighed their options. They had three choices. They could go into the city, but that wouldn't help because the people inside were as bad off as they were. They could go to the enemy camp and surrender or they could sit there and die. They reasoned, “If we surrender to the enemy we might die. If we sit here and do nothing we are sure to die.”

Thus, they determined the deadliest thing they could do was do nothing. So they decided to take a chance. They decided to go to the enemy camp and surrender.

To their utter surprise, when they got there, they found the camp deserted. The Lord had caused the Syrian army to hear a great sound and, thinking it to be another army attacking, fled for their lives, leaving all their food and supplies behind. The four lepers found not only enough food for themselves, but enough to save the entire city.

They and the city were saved because they refused to sit and die. The Lord had provided deliverance only as they acted, as they got up and did something.

Many churches today are in the same predicament as those four lepers and they need to ask themselves the same question. They are slowly dying and don't even know it. They need to wake up and then get up and do something. They need to act.

Christianity is on the decline in America today while other religions are growing all around us. In my hometown of Port Arthur, Texas, what was once a thriving Baptist church is now a Buddhist temple. It is a sign of the times.

Ray Steadman, speaking at a conference on expository preaching in California said 85 percent of the denominations in America are in decline. It is only because of mergers that some show any growth at all. The down-size problem is a king-size headache for most churches today.

And we Baptists are no exception. If you read our propaganda you would think we are going great guns. But 70 percent of our churches have plateaued or are declining. The only real growth we are experiencing is among ethnics — Hispanics, Koreans, Vietnamese. We Baptists have quit growing but we haven't quit crowing. E. V. Hill nailed us when he said, "I love to speak to you Southern Baptists because of who you think you are."

We must beware of fooling ourselves. Self-deception is the easiest of all deceptions. Most of the growth we recognize and brag about is transfers of membership. I'm not minimizing the importance of people transferring their membership, but just moving sheep from one pasture to another does not increase the size of the herd. Transfers may build our kingdom, but they do not build his kingdom.

We stand, I believe, at the crossroads of life and death

today as the people of God. If we would win our state we must awaken to our condition and then ask ourselves the same question those four lepers asked themselves, “Why sit we here till we die?” We don’t have to sit and die. We can get up and move on to greatness. The choice is ours.

If we want not just to survive, but to thrive, there are several things we must do. I offer five suggestions:

- A church needs to develop a clear sense of mission.
- A church needs to provide meaningful programs for the people.
- A church needs to be enthusiastic in all it does.
- A church needs to maintain a loving fellowship.
- A church needs to stay aggressive in outreach.
- A church needs to be fervent in prayer.

We Exist By Mission

First, to live a church needs to develop a clear sense of mission. Mission always comes first. Churches die because they forget who they are and why they are here and become at ease in Zion.

I was interim pastor once at a church that was not dead but it was on the critically ill list. It had plateaued years earlier and was slowly dwindling away. Death in most churches comes so slowly the people hardly notice it. In a community where 48 percent of the adults were singles, the church had 10 or 12 attending their singles Sunday School department. After my first visit to that department I asked myself, “How did they allow this to happen? Why wasn’t something done to reach more singles?”

I led the church to hire a part-time singles minister and within three months they were running 40-50 in attendance. When the new director proposed some changes, several of

the ladies who prided themselves in being fourth generation members of the church said, “We don’t want to change. We are comfortable with things as they are.”

She responded, “Yes, but what about all the other people out there who need comforting?” They had completely lost sight of that. They had lost their sense of mission and thought only of themselves.

When the people on the inside of churches are more concerned about their own comfort than for people on the outside in need of comfort, the church is in peril of its life. Or, to put it another way, an organization begins to die the day it begins to be run for the benefit of the insiders and not for the benefit of the outsiders.

According to studies conducted on growing churches around the nation, the two central elements to attracting new people to a church and to faith in Christ are vision and passion. Vision is seeing what needs to be done — what you ought to do. And passion is a burning desire, a compulsion to get it done.

No church needs to sit around and wonder why it is here or what it is to do. Nor does it need to appoint a committee to develop a mission statement for the church. The Lord has already done that. Jesus said, “The son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost” (Luke 19:10). And again, he said, “The son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Then, later he told his disciples, “As my father hath sent me, even so send I you” (John 20:21). So, his mission is our mission.

Jesus’ last words to his disciples were, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded

you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:19-20).

That seems clear enough. It is changed lives. Our mission is to build his kingdom both bigger and stronger. We build it bigger by evangelism and stronger by discipleship. But mission is a fragile thing. Without continual attention and careful focus, it easily becomes blurred and obscure.

When that happens the organization becomes more important than the cause, and tradition replaces mission. And thus reaching out to the community and the world for Christ become secondary to maintaining things as they are.

You don’t believe this? Let me ask you a question. Is there one Sunday School class in your entire church that has a goal of winning three new people to Christ this next year? Is there a Sunday School class in your church that has a goal of increasing its average attendance by a specific number next year? Or, does your entire Sunday School have any kind of goals that it expects to reach this next year? I seriously doubt it. So if they do anything it will be purely by accident. Our goal, in most instances, is simply to meet next Sunday.

We need then to ask ourselves, do we have the passion to do what needs to be done? Early in his pastoral career, Jonathan Edwards, who led the great awakening, said he had to grapple with what it would mean for his congregation to be revived. His church was solidly orthodox. They could rattle off the tenets of the Christian faith. But few of them cared deeply about Christ. They were absorbed and fascinated by business and everyday life, but they gave little attention to God. Many of our churches are the same way. They like things as they are. They don’t want to be revived. They are content to sit and sing “Just As I Am” to one

another. That's why they die.

I remind you that one man with a passion is worth 100 men with an interest. The church exists by mission like a fire exists by burning. When the fire stops burning it goes out. It dies. And when a church loses its sense of mission, then the church is dead even though it may continue to meet and have all the outward signs of life.

Small Men, Long Shadows

Second, to live a church needs to provide meaningful programs for the people. The leaders of the church, lay and ministerial, must be willing to build the buildings, hire the staff, spend the money, take the risk, and expend the energy necessary to provide innovative programs that meet the needs of people or eventually the church will die.

A church might be able to keep the people it already has with a mediocre program. They will stay because of loyalty to the church, friendships within the church, or involvement in the programs. But it will be difficult to reach new people without them. New people in town and the unreached do not have such loyalties, friendships, or involvement. A church ought to ask itself, "Why should people come to our church? What do we have to offer that others do not offer at a more convenient location?"

The two biggest problems confronting our churches today are changing neighborhoods and unchanging attitudes. When the problem is a changing neighborhood the church must either relocate or stagnate.

But the bigger problem for most churches is unchanging attitudes. An unwillingness to change and provide adequate programs to reach the community. Even churches in good locations can and will die if they don't provide good programs and reach out to their community.

But to do all this usually demands change and in dying churches people resist change. Charles Darwin gave me a good definition of insanity: “To do the same thing over and over again and expect different results.” If you keep doing what you’ve always done, you’ll keep getting what you’ve always gotten.

I didn’t see the movie, “Grumpy Old Men,” but the title is suggestive of the leadership in many of our churches. When that is the case, the church is headed for a slow but certain death.

Paul Harvey put it best, “When small men cast long shadows, the sun is about to set.” In a dying church it is the little thinkers who are the big stinkers. This is no time for small leadership either in the pulpit or in the pew, in the staff or in the laity. We must rise to the occasion if we are to win our world to Christ.

Be Excited and Be Committed

Third, to live a church needs to be enthusiastic in all it does. In fact, the single most distinguishing mark of an alive, dynamic church is enthusiasm. I was recently in a retreat in Dry Creek, Louisiana, with Dr. Bill Thorn. He told of visiting with the old evangelistic singer, Joe Trussell, just before his death. Joe had once been one of our most popular singers but now was very old. He said to Dr. Thorn, “Bill, I’ve lost my voice but I’ve not lost my song.”

Do you know what troubles me most about most churches and most preachers? It is that they have lost their song. The joy has gone out of their worship and their service and they are just going through the motions of church.

That same thing was happening in Malachi’s day. The people came to church and when they got there they said to themselves, “Oh, what a weariness it is” (Mal. 1:13). They

were not willing to abandon worship altogether, but neither were they willing to put their whole hearts into it. So they went through the motions halfheartedly.

You can't mumble through the music, fumble through the bulletin, stumble through the sermon, and grumble through the invitation and expect to have any impact on the world. There is enough dullness in the world without the church adding to it.

Worship and our faith are either a dull monotony or an acute fever. Which is it in your church? And we must be on constant guard to keep the fires of devotion and dedication burning. If we become lethargic, indifferent, lackadaisical, the church will die . . . and it ought to.

When people come they should be greeted with a warm handshake and a friendly smile. The music should be from the heart and should stir the soul. The sermon should be delivered with a sense of sincerity and urgency and all that takes places should be conducted as though it mattered eternally.

Winston Churchill once said, "At any moment in history the world is in the hands of two percent of the people — the excited and the committed." If we want to survive and thrive, we must be both.

A Strong and Stable Fellowship

Fourth, to live a church must maintain a loving fellowship. A house divided against itself cannot stand. And neither can a church in civil war. Conflict and strife will eventually kill any organization. Our Baptist congregational-type government, with no hierarchy, lends itself to both. In a Baptist church any member can stand in business meeting and say whatever they think, even if they don't think. And, it's possible for a few individuals or

families to get control of the church and run it. These two facts alone can lead to strife and division over everything from buildings to budgets to staff. One evidence — 22.8 percent of evangelical Protestant ministers have been fired or forced to resign. That spells trouble any way you look at it. I received a letter recently from a 94-year-old pastor. In his years since retirement he had been interim pastor in 25 churches — 23 of which had been troubled.

Whenever there is conflict in the church many good people leave or drop out of church altogether. They have enough problems without the church adding to them. They are trying to hold their marriages together, keep their kids off drugs, pay the mortgage, hold onto their jobs. They don't have time for petty religious squabbles.

In the movie, "Lawrence of Arabia," there is a scene where Thomas Edward Lawrence, the English colonel who helped organize the Arab revolt against Turkey, tells his Arab counterpart, "If the desert tribes do not unite as a nation they will be forever destined to be a silly and inconsequential people."

We face the same alternatives in our churches.

Up and At 'Em

Fifth, to live a church must stay aggressive in outreach. Left alone, people will sit and do nothing and do it very well until Jesus comes. In fact, in the churches I pastored, the people did nothing better than they did anything else. If they do that long enough they will die from laziness and neglect. Unless people are aggressive in outreach, tireless in ministry and anxious to serve as needed the church cannot thrive.

I met a former staff man at the convention. I asked, "How are you doing?" He answered, "Great! I'm working

with a preacher who doesn't do anything and I'm helping him." There are too many people doing nothing and too many others helping them.

In a community where I once pastored there was a small, struggling church in the midst of a bustling, growing area. It had once been an open country church, but the community had moved out and completely surrounded it. But, it was not growing. I offered to send some of my laymen over to join their laymen in a visitation-outreach program so they could reach their community. But, they did not respond. They had little or no interest in reaching the community — and it sat there and died.

When that attitude penetrates any congregation, it is in peril of its life eventually. Even first time visitors can smell the stench of death in that atmosphere.

The Breath of God

Finally, to live a church must be fervent in prayer. Dr. Ralph Herring was pastor of First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, for years, and before his death became the director of our Southern Baptist seminary extension work. Some years before he went into that work, and before he concluded his ministry in North Carolina, he had the opportunity of going to an organ recital in a town hall where there was an organ which one of his own kinfolk, on his mother's side of the family, had designed. He was so impressed because that organ had 8,672 pipes. That's a fair size instrument. He said he sat there looking at 8,672 pipes, and all he could think of was, "My own kin built that!" He said then it was as if God spoke to him and said, "Ralph, 8,672 pipes. That's real impressive, but I want to remind you that there would not be one note from any one of those 8,672 pipes without the breath and the bellows."

Likewise, there are lots of members in the church. But without the breath of God on us, not one real note of conviction will be heard from us.

Following the ascension, the disciples of Jesus met in the upper room, 120 of them, to pray. They all believed in God. They all believed in Jesus. They all believed the resurrection. They all believed the scriptures. But nothing happened until the Holy Spirit came upon them. It was then that they became the church.

I remind you, buildings are not enough — they had the upper room. Bodies are not enough — there were 120 of them. Beliefs are not enough — they had their doctrine straight. They needed the breath of God upon them. And when God breathes upon us, the church will come alive today also.

So, why sit we here till we die? Let's get up and do something. Let's change anything that needs to be changed. And let's pray until God chooses to breathe on us.

In the summer of 1865 James P. Boyce and John A. Broadus met with the faculty of Southern Seminary to consider resuming classes. They had been suspended because of the Civil War. The outlook was bleak. The students were few. The resources were meager. After a lengthy discussion, John Broadus rose to say, "Suppose we quietly agree that this seminary may die, but we will die first."

That's the kind of commitment we need today.

Someone asked Mother Theresa how she wanted to be remembered. She replied, "I want to be remembered as a pencil in the hand of God." I think the Lord wants to write a new chapter in Christian history — the 29th chapter of Acts. But he needs a pencil. Will you be it?

Chapter 2

Repenting: The Seven Deadly Sins of the Modern Church

1 Peter 4:17

Mahatmas Ghandi, the Indian sage, once gave a list of what he believed to be the seven deadly sins of society:

- worship without sacrifice
- politics without principle
- wealth without work
- pleasure without conscience
- knowledge without character
- business without morality
- science without humanity

When I read his list it reminded me of the words of Solomon: “These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him.” Then he gave us a list of seven deadly sins: “A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren” (Prov. 6:16-19).

This started me to wondering, “What are the seven deadly sins of the modern church?” The church is in trouble today. The signs are everywhere: the scandalous lives of some of its leaders; internal bickering within congregations and denominations; the invasion of secularism; diluting our message to appeal to baby boomers; putting church growth

above spiritual growth; and relying more on political action than the gospel to change society.

So serious is our condition, that Chuck Colson, founder and chairman of Prison Fellowship, said concerning the entire evangelical movement, “If this were a business, you’d be contemplating Chapter 11.”

What are the seven deadly sins of the modern church? Often the deadliest sins are born out of the noblest of motives. This makes them hard to detect and worse to confront. But, here is a list of what I believe to be the biggest sins confronting us today:

- worship without reverence
- salvation without repentance
- evangelism without discipleship
- prosperity without stewardship
- orthodoxy without enthusiasm
- organization without unity
- privilege without responsibility

Trivializing God

The first deadly sin of the modern church is worship without reverence. Central to all we do is the worship of God. And there is a renewed emphasis on worship today such as I have not seen in my lifetime. But it is a strange kind of worship. It seems to be influenced more by the sociology of George Barna than the theology of the apostle Paul. Barna tells us that Baby Boomers are bored with traditional church approaches, standard worship services, and even sacred hymns. They are fascinated with fast-moving “Indiana Jones” type movies and want non-stop, secular-style services.

In an effort to reach them and build a big audience, many churches have discarded their hymnals and diluted their

message. They have traded their hymnals for song sheets and overhead projectors, traded truth for therapy, and have made preaching more psychological than biblical. One well-known television preacher typifies many preachers today. He said he doesn't mention sin in his sermons because it's negative and people have enough negative in their lives already.

As a result of all this, we spend more time entertaining the goats than we do in feeding the sheep. I like fun, easy to sing choruses, but the purpose of music is not just to make us feel good. Its primary purpose, according to the apostle Paul, is to "teach and admonish" (Col. 3:16). If that's the case, we better pay more attention to the text than to the tune of what we sing.

I believe in preaching to people's needs. But, we need to preach to their real needs, not just their felt needs. And what people need is a message, not a massage. Preaching is to open our eyes, prick our conscience, and stir our hearts toward God.

I know the church must change, but not too much and not too fast. Since everything is changing I think one of the glories of the church is that it maintains a community which relates to the past.

The spirit of any age is always a mixture of truth and falsehood. We go to church, in part, to receive truth that transcends the age. The gospel is to speak to this age and to resist fiercely a lot of the spirit of this age. If our faith is not greater and wiser than the insight of a particular age, what good is it?

We need to remember the words of Bishop Richard Emory, "If you marry the fad of your generation you will be a widow in the next."

We need to recapture in worship what Martin Luther

called “coram deo” — the sense of fear and awe in the presence of God. To secularize worship and to trivialize God is a sin.

Turning the Sheepfold into a Zoo

The second deadly sin of the modern church is forgiveness without repentance. In an effort to grow big churches we have watered down the gospel and are offering salvation at bargain-basement prices. We have led people to think all they need do is believe, be baptized, and belong.

The result is we are turning God’s sheepfold into a zoo. Billy Sunday was right, “You can find anything in the average church from a hummingbird to a turkey buzzard.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was imprisoned by Hitler for his faith, wrote from prison his classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he warned about cheap grace. Cheap grace is grace without contrition, grace without commitment.

I remind you that while salvation is free it is not cheap. It cost Jesus his life. And, it will cost you yours. We must die to self and to sin to be his disciple.

Peter put it succinctly, “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). He offered grace, but not cheap grace.

It comes down to this, you and your sins must part or you and God cannot be friends. To offer forgiveness under any other terms is to cheapen grace and that is a sin.

Filling the Church With Empty People

The third deadly sin of the modern church is evangelism without discipleship. Dr. A. V. Washburn was once asked, “When will Southern Baptists get over their obsession with

numbers?” He answered, “Never, I would devoutly pray! Never — so long as we seek people for the glory of God! Never — so long as we reach people for Bible study, for the preaching of the word, for Christian training, for Christ and his service!”

I, too, hope we never get over our obsession with numbers. Evangelism has always been our hallmark. But, in our quest for quantity we have sacrificed quality. As a result we have filled our churches with empty people. Our people don’t know what they believe or how to behave. We Baptists today are many but we are not much.

Evangelism is only a part of the mission of the church. Not everything that counts can be counted. We are also to disciple people until they grow to “the fullness of the stature of Christ.”

George Grant, in his book, *Truth and Consequences*, wrote: “Christian men have especially fallen prey to the spirit of the times. We don’t want anything to be terribly demanding. We don’t want to deal with those things that actually challenge our pet notions. We want cheap grace, positive thinking, easy faith, we want Christian lite.”

Don’t worry — be happy jingles seem to have replaced the prepare-to-meet-thy-God refrain; the twelve steps seem to have replaced the one way.

Today it is far better for a man to be witty than weighty, we want soft-sell, we want relevance, we want an up-beat, low-key, clever, motivational, friendly, informal, yuppified, and abbreviated faith. No ranting, no raving, no Bible thumping, no heavy commitments, no strings attached, no muss, no fuss, we want the same salvation as in the old time religion — but with half the hassle and a third less guilt.

It is rooted in the dumbing-down and the easing-up of

the demands of the gospel. It is rooted in the oversimplification and the under-estimation of discipleship.

To evangelize without discipling is like giving birth to a baby and leaving it on the steps of the hospital to fend for itself. And, that's a sin.

Impoverished by Wealth

The fourth deadly sin of the modern church is prosperity without stewardship. St. Thomas Aquinas supposedly once visited the pope. As they toured the Vatican they came eventually to the papal treasury. Viewing the vast wealth of the church the pope said, "See, Thomas, no longer must the church say, 'Silver and gold have I none.'" And, Thomas replied, "Yes, and neither can it say, 'Arise and walk.'"

Our prosperity has impoverished us. Like the church at Laodicia, we have become proud, self-sufficient, and independent. And that's a sin.

What a contrast in what we say about ourselves and what the Lord says about us. We say, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17). But he says, "Thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."

The giving of the modern church is distressing. It is a well-known fact that 20 percent of the people give 80 percent of the money. Recent surveys showed that the people who do the giving in America are the very rich and the working poor. The affluent are conspicuous only by their absence.

The IRS reports: "The higher the tax payer's income, the less likely he or she is to give." People who earn between \$10-15,000 a year are ten times more likely to make charitable contributions than people earning \$50-100,000 a year. We are robbing God and that's a sin.

Missionary statesman T. C. Studd set giving in

perspective when he said, “If Jesus Christ be God, and he died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.”

Dancing in the Aisles or Sleeping in the Pews

The fifth deadly sin of the modern church is orthodoxy without enthusiasm. It’s possible for a church to be as straight as a gun barrel theologically and as cold as a gun barrel spiritually. And dead orthodoxy is just as bad as shallow emotionalism.

We are like the church at Sardis. The Lord said, “Thou hast a name that thou livest but thou art dead” (Rev. 3:1). They had the name but not the nature.

Names alone are not enough. In the Bronx, New York, I saw a church named “The Holy Temple Church in Christ Jesus of the Apostolic Doctrine.” If a name was enough that church would have everything. But it met in a dilapidated old building on a back street.

I don’t want to turn the church into a holy hootenanny, but we do need to be excited and enthusiastic about what we do. We need to be somewhere between dancing in the aisles and sleeping in the pews. To do that we must be alive, dynamic, enthusiastic, full of hope. After all, the church is the body of Christ. How can we declare to the world that he is alive and well if the church, his body, is dull and dead?

To be listless and indifferent about God and his word is a sin.

A Family in Disarray

The sixth deadly sin of the modern church is organization without unity. We Baptists are the most

organizational minded people in the world. Anytime you get three Baptists together they want to elect officers. But organization alone is not enough. In his priestly prayer for us our Lord prayed that we would be one (John 17:21). He never prayed that we would be organized. He did pray that we would be unified.

The central message of the Bible is that God is love. But how can we declare to the world that God is love when we do not love one another? We live in an incredibly hostile environment. We need each other. An editorial from North East India appeared in the “BWA news.” Regrettably, it describes the sad situation within too many Christian communities today.

Instead of casting nets into the deep, we cast stones at one another. Instead of extending helping hands, we point accusing fingers. Instead of being fishers of the lost, we become critics of the saved. Rather than helping the hurting, we hurt the helpers. And sadly, the poor go unfed, the confused go uncounseled, and the lost go unreached.

One of the seven deadly sins Solomon names is “sowing discord” among the brethren. The word “discord” means “to quarrel, to be contentious, to create strife.” To do that is a sin — a deadly sin.

John R. Mott, the founder of the YMCA, said, “The price we have paid for a divided Christendom is an unbelieving world.”

The Statue of Responsibility

The seventh deadly sin of the church is privilege without responsibility. The late Bishop Fulton Sheen once said, “We have a statue of liberty on the east coast. We now need a statue of responsibility on the west coast.”

It is strange, I think, that many who stand up so

vigorously for their rights, fall down so miserably on their duties. There are privileges in the Christian life. One of these is the priesthood of the believer. That means each of us has direct access to God, in prayer and to confess sin, and that we are competent to interpret scriptures for ourselves.

What a wonderful privilege! But there is another side to priesthood. The Latin word for priest is “pontifex” which literally means “a bridge builder.” We not only have the privilege of approaching God for ourselves, we also have a responsibility to build bridges between men and God. Through prayer, through personal witnessing, through godly living, we are to bring men to God. To claim the privileges of priesthood without accepting the responsibilities is a sin.

Now my text: “For the time has come when judgment must begin at the house of God” (1 Peter 4:17). The Greek word translated “judgment” is the word “krima,” from which we get the word “criminal.” It means to call into question, to investigate, to pass sentence.

If we would win our state we must clean up our act, set our house in order, and judge ourselves before the Lord judges us. I’m not talking about powdering the nose on a corpse. I’m talking about radical surgery.

The captain of the Titanic refused to believe that the ship was in trouble until water was ankle deep in the mail room. Then it was too late. Water has been in the mail room of the church for a long time. But, it’s not too late. God is giving us time and now is the time . . .

It’s time to put less whoopee and more “woe-is-me” in worship.

It’s time to say to people, “You and your sins must part or you and God cannot be friends.”

It’s time to stop dipping people and leaving them to drip-

dry in the baptistry. We must win them and then walk with them until we wean them from the milk of the word.

It's time to move from the realm of the superficial to the realm of the sacrificial in our giving.

It's time to preach as though never to preach again. As a dying man to dying men.

It's time to stop throwing rocks and start throwing ropes.

It's time to stop standing up for our rights while we're sitting down on our responsibilities.

In short, the time has come when judgment must begin at the house of God.

Chapter 3

Praying: The All Importance of Prayer

1 Timothy 2:1-8

As I parked in front of a bookstore in Del Rio, Texas, years ago, I noticed a sign on the door that said “Closed.” I walked up to the door to see what time the store opened, and as I approached the “Closed” sign, I noticed a line printed above it and a line below it. The line above read, “The ears of our Father are never . . .” then the word “Closed” . . . and below it the line, “To the prayers of his children.”

So, what appeared to be an ordinary “Closed” sign was actually an open invitation to prayer. There are many such invitations in the Bible. The Lord said, through Jeremiah, “Call on me and I will answer thee and show thee great and mighty things which thou knowest not” (Jer. 33:3).

And, Jesus said, “Ask and it shall be given, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be open unto you. For everyone that asketh receiveth and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8).

The Bible not only contains invitations to prayer, it also contains admonitions to prayer. The reason is, prayer is at the heart of a personal relationship with God. Prayer is not just a way of getting things from God. It is a way of getting to know God. Prayer is talking to God and you cannot have a personal relationship with a person you do not talk to.

You can have an intellectual relationship with the Lord without prayer. That is, you can believe in him as a historical

person and never talk to him. You can have an institutional relationship with the Lord without prayer. That is, you can belong to the church, attend the church, and even work in the church without talking to the Lord. And, you can have a social relationship with the Lord without prayer. That is, you can find your circle of friends among those who believe in and follow the Lord. But, you cannot have a personal relationship with him unless you pray, and the more you pray, the deeper your relationship grows.

One of the places where we are admonished to pray is 1 Timothy 2:1-8. In these verses Paul tells us that supplications and prayers and intercessions and the giving of thanks should be made for all men. Then he gets specific. We should pray for kings and all that are in authority.

The reason is so we can live quiet and peaceable lives. It is in that climate that people are most apt to hear and receive the gospel. And, it is the will of God that all be saved.

Then he reminds us that there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ, who gave his life for our sins on the cross.

Paul closes this admonition by saying, "I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (1 Tim. 2:8).

If we would win our state we must begin to pray like that. We must realize the all importance of prayer and practice it. Four particular truths emerge from this passage:

- We are to pray in all ways.
- We are to pray for all men.
- We are to pray with all confidence.
- We are to pray in all places.

Understanding Prayer

First, we should pray in all ways. Paul said, “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men.” Each one of those words helps us understand something about prayer. Supplications are requests. It suggests the idea of need. So, prayer is asking God for what you need. The word “prayers” carries with it the idea of praise. So, prayer is praising God for who he is. Intercessions are pleas in behalf of others. So, prayer is entreating God for someone else. And, giving thanks is expressing gratitude, so prayer is thanking God for what he has done.

So, prayer is asking God for what you need, praising God for who he is, thanking God for what he has done, and beseeching God for other people.

Jesus, in his prayer life, prayed in all these ways. He made supplications in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, “Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done” (Matt. 26:39). His prayer was an expression of need in his own life.

But Jesus didn’t just ask for things for himself. He also praised the name of God. As he faced the cross he said, “Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name” (John 12:27-28). It was when he said that that God spoke from heaven and said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). So Jesus not only asked for some things he needed, but he praised God for who he was.

And Jesus prayed for other people. He said to his friend Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not” (Luke 22:31-32). He not only

asked for things for himself, but he got outside himself and prayed for others.

And the prayers of Jesus were filled with expressions of thanksgiving. Before he broke the loaves and distributed the fish to the multitudes he gave thanks to God (John 6:11). In the upper room, before he poured the cup, he gave thanks to God (Luke 22:17). Repeatedly in the scriptures there are occasions when Jesus thanked God for the things he had done and things he had not done (Matt. 11:25).

So, in his prayer life Jesus asked God for what he needed, praised God for who he was, thanked God for what he had done, and beseeched God for other people. That's the way Jesus prayed and that's the way we ought to pray.

If God is your father and you are his child, it is not wrong to ask him for things. It's okay to make supplications to God. But don't limit your prayer life to just asking God for things. Learn to praise God for who he is.

In addition to asking for things for yourself, get outside yourself and think about other people. Remember to pray for them and the needs in their lives.

And your prayer life ought to include thanksgiving. Most of us would be far more effective in our prayer life if we would yank out a few groans and shove in a few shouts. No matter what's going on in your life you can always find something to be thankful for. Warren Bennett said, "On the worst day of my life I could think of ten things I could be thankful for."

A little girl and her brother, walking across a pasture, were charged by a mad bull. Because she was older and bigger, the sister was able to climb the nearest tree, but Johnny ran for the fence. Perched on a limb, the sister screamed out her advice, "Run, Johnny! Run!" As he neared the fence, she yelled, "Slide, Johnny! Slide!" He did, but

his pants became caught in the barbed wire. Her last bit of advice was, “Pray, Johnny! Pray!” The only prayer Johnny had ever heard was his father repeating grace at mealtime, but the bull was closing in fast and he needed to do something, so he used his daddy’s prayer, “Lord, we thank thee for that which we are about to receive.”

So even when you’re caught by the seat of the pants, there is something you can be thankful for.

If we are ever going to be effective in our prayer life, we must learn to pray in all of these ways.

Respecting Authority

Second, we should pray for all men. The Lord wants all men to be saved and knows that the gospel can go forward best in peaceful times, so we pray for all men, especially our leaders, so that we might live in peace so the gospel can go forward.

Who is God talking about when he says “all men?” Let me suggest some of the people we should pray for.

We should pray for the sick. The sick were often brought to Jesus. He didn’t pray for them, but he touched them and healed them. James wrote, “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick” (James 5:14-15).

We ought to pray for little children. Parents brought their children to Jesus that he might touch them and pray for them (Matt. 19:13). They wanted Jesus to put his hand on the head of their child and bless the child. As Jesus prayed for little children, we ought to pray for little children.

We ought to pray for our friends. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus said, “I pray for them: I pray not for the world but for them which thou hast given me . . . I pray not that

thou shouldest take them out of the world but that thou shouldest keep them from evil . . . Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:9, 15, 17). Jesus prayed for his friends and so should we.

We are to pray for our enemies. On the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And he taught us, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you” (Matt. 5:44). Chances are, if you pray for your enemies, it won’t be long until they won’t be enemies anymore. They will be your friends. Jesus prayed for his enemies and so should we.

We ought to pray for laborers. Jesus looked on the masses of people and said to his disciples, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that he will send forth laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37-38). The word “send” in the original language means “to thrust,” “to hurl forth.” It is the same word that is used on occasions to describe Jesus casting demons out of people. That was often a violent act. Jesus was saying, “You pray that there shall come such an irresistible appeal to the hearts of people that they cannot help but go out and evangelize the world.” Jesus prayed for workers and so should we.

Paul then mentioned specifically that we should pray for “kings, and for all that are in authority.” I am concerned about the growing inclination among us to despise government and detest those who govern. It is a trend for almost everyone to bash leaders and it is seriously eroding public respect for government.

I realize that those who govern are capable of shameful misconduct and can be wasteful, extravagant, incompetent, and dishonest. And government almost always stands in

need of correction and improvement. But government is not inherently evil and not all politicians are crooked.

We ought to critique our political leaders. We ought to write them and express our views to them. We most certainly ought to vote. But a rising tide of animosity and hostility toward government threatens to undermine the desire and ability of anyone to govern.

There are several basics we need to understand. We must have people in authority in our nation, our state, our local community, our schools, and our churches. There are some things that only government can do if we are to have an orderly society. Among these are such things as public safety, public education, criminal justice, and military defense. So there must be leadership.

Nobody can please everybody. No preacher can please his congregation all the time. No mayor can please his city all the time. No governor can please his state all the time. No president can please his nation all the time. No one can please everyone all the time.

We ought to critique our leaders. We ought to commend our leaders. And, for sure, we ought to vote. But, prayer is the best way for us to affect leadership. I'll probably never be invited to the White House. If I write a letter to the president he will never read it. If I called him I couldn't get through to him. But I am not helpless in affecting what happens in the White House or in the state house, because I've got a means of getting through that is more effective than an invitation or a letter or a telephone call. I can pray and that is what scripture tells us to do.

Let me offer you a suggestion. The next time somebody starts bashing our political leaders, why don't you say to them, "You know, that concerns me, too. In fact, I prayed about that today." Can you imagine what would happen if

all across our land God's people started praying every day for those who are in authority?

Just imagine the doors of opportunity to witness that might open to your friends if you did this. But, you may say, many of our politicians are not honorable. Well, look at some of the authorities in power when Paul wrote these words. Herod was the king. He seduced his half-brother's wife and had John the Baptist beheaded.

Felix was the governor of Judea. He kept Paul locked up in prison for two years when he knew he was innocent. He kept him in prison hoping to get a bribe to release him.

Nero was the emperor. He was one of the most despicable men who ever lived. He killed his own mother. He murdered his own wife. He had his half-brother put to death. Toward the end of his fourteen year reign he burned the city of Rome and blamed it on Christians.

Tradition tells us that he would have Christians impaled on stakes, then covered with pitch, and used them as human torches for his gardens. And he wrapped Christians in fresh animal skins and set his wild dogs on them, just for the joy of seeing them torn to pieces. When Nero died the people danced in the streets.

With rulers like that Paul said we ought to pray for those who are in authority. The reason is so we can live quiet and peaceable lives, so that the gospel can have the best climate in which to grow, because God wants all men to be saved, to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Just One Between

Third, we ought to pray in all confidence. Paul writes, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (v. 5). There is just one person who stands between us and God — Jesus Christ, who gave

his life a ransom for all.

Jesus said, “Whatsoever you shall ask in my name, that will I do.” That’s why we end our prayers with the phrase, “We pray this in Jesus’ name.” We don’t approach God in our own name. We come in the name of Jesus. And when we approach God through Jesus, God pays attention.

I receive a lot of calls in my work. People want to sell me something, want to invest for us, want a job. Often before they call me they have one of my friends write or call and ask me to see them.

Others write and say they are a friend of a friend of mine. They approach me through a friend.

If a person really wants to get through to me all they have to do is say they are a friend of one of my children. I really pay attention then.

While it’s not exactly the same way with God, you at least get the idea. When we come to God through his son, Jesus Christ, God pays attention. As Billy Sunday said, “When I go in the name of Jesus Christ, God will stop making worlds to hear me.” That’s why we can pray with all confidence.

Can You Hear Him?

Finally, we are to pray in all places. Paul says, “I will therefore that men pray every where.” Where are we to pray? At home, in the church, in the car, in the work place, in school. Yes, as long as there are tests, people are going to pray in school.

We are to pray in hospitals and in restaurants. We ought to pray everywhere. But we will pray best if we have a quiet place. Bill Watkins, founder of Watkins Motor Lines, Inc. of Lakeland, Florida, tells: “One evening when I was complaining about a particularly tough problem in my

trucking business, my sister asked, 'Have you prayed about it, Bill?'

'Sure,' I quickly replied. 'Whenever I can.'

'You mean "catch as catch can," don't you?' she said, knowing I was constantly on the run between work and home and any number of other things. 'The Lord can hear me just as well when I'm running,' I answered.

'Yes,' she said, 'but can *you* hear him?'"

We are to pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, Paul says. That was the posture of the Jews in prayer. But the emphasis is not on the posture, but on "holy hands."

It was as if the worshipper was saying, "God, look at my hands. My hands are clean!" It is essential that we come to God with a clean heart. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully" (Ps. 24:3-4).

And Isaiah wrote, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isa. 59:1-2).

We ought to pray without wrath, without anger in our hearts. General James Oglethorpe said to John Wesley, "I never forgive." Wesley said, "Well sir, then I hope you never sin." If we don't forgive those who sin against us, God will not forgive us.

And we ought to pray without doubting. We must pray in faith.

I went back to the bookstore in Del Rio later that day and the owners had turned the "Closed" sign around so that it now said "Open." As I walked up to the door I noticed a

line above the word “Open” and another below. The one above said, “Jesus wants you to . . .” and down below read, “Your heart to him.”

That’s the message we need. God’s ears are never *closed* to the prayers of his children. And, Jesus wants you to *open* your heart to him. We are to pray in all ways. We are to pray for all men. We are to pray with all confidence. We are to pray in all places.

Chapter 4

Weeping: The Tears of Jesus

Luke 19:41

Many years ago there was a medical missionary in Africa named George Harley. He built a small clinic and a chapel next to it. Very quickly the natives started coming to the hospital but for some reason they refused to go to the church. For the better part of four years the only people who entered that chapel were Dr. and Mrs. Harley and their young son.

One day, though, Harley's son fell off a ledge and hit his head on a sharp rock. The missionary ran to the youngster's side, but he could not save the boy's life. A casket was made for the lad from old shipping crates and a memorial service planned. Only the two missionaries attended, and not a word was spoken. Let Dr. Harley finish the account in his own words:

I could not speak, I could not pray, so finally I just picked up the casket and put it on my shoulder and started to carry it out to the place where he would be buried.

As we walked along the road, a man came alongside and asked, "Great Father, what do you have in that box?" I replied, "It's my son. He died last night." Then the man took one end of the casket and I took the other, and we carried it to the graveside where I broke down completely, and began to cry, "Why, God, why?"

The man looked at me and then ran back to the village

with the announcement, shouting it from house to house, “The Great Father cries, just like us. The Great Father cries, just like us.”

Then they came running from all directions and put their arms around us, and tried to comfort us. And from that time on, every time we had a service in the chapel, those who were not in the clinic were in the chapel. And that’s how we finally got through. But oh, the cost.

Nothing shows our humanity, our heartache, or our hurt quite like tears. That’s why we’re not surprised to read of Jesus, “And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it” (Luke 19:41).

Jesus was coming to the city of Jerusalem for the last time. He had been among the people for three and a half years, preaching, teaching, and performing all kinds of miracles. He had made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and even raised the dead. But now the end had come. In just a few days he would be crucified by the people he came to save in this city he came to save.

A great crowd accompanied him, praising God and singing hosannas as the prophet had said. As he came over the crest of Mount Olivet he had a full and magnificent view of the city. The city had been founded by David, the king of Israel, over 1,000 years earlier and was the center of the religious world.

When he saw the city, Luke tells us, he wept over it. This is one of three times the scriptures record that Jesus wept. He wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35). He wept in the Garden of Gethsemane as he agonized over the cross (Heb. 5:7; Matt. 26:39, 53). And here he weeps over the city of Jerusalem.

The verb “wept” used here denotes a loud expression

of grief. At the grave of Lazarus he wept silently. Here he weeps openly and unashamedly.

Why did he weep? He did not weep for himself. He had long lived his life under the shadow of the cross. He had even told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the religious leaders and be killed (Matt. 16:21). Now that time had come. He knew that ahead was the agony of Gethsemane, the mockery and shame of a trial, the crown of thorns, the nails in his hands and feet, and the spear in his side. But none of this moved him.

He wept not for himself but for the city. These were not the tears of a failed conqueror; they were not the tears of a defeated leader; they were the tears of a loving savior. They were tears of sympathy for what he saw.

The cup of Israel's iniquity was now full. The mercy of God was exhausted. This was the day and the hour of her last opportunity. She had been blinded by prejudice and hardened by ignorance, and now all that remained was the judgment of God. His tears represent the attitude of his soul toward a lost city and a lost world. He wept then as he weeps now over a lost world.

Why did he weep? He wept over the condition of men. He saw the city lost in the darkness of sin and unbelief. They were religious, but lost. They were without God and without hope in the world. And seeing that, he wept.

He wept over the destiny of men. He saw them under the wrath of God. The cup of their sin was full. The mercy of God was exhausted. Judgment was approaching. Jerusalem, in all of its pride and splendor, would perish. In a few years the Roman legions under the command of Emperor Titus would besiege and destroy the city. This act of God's judgment upon a rebellious people would be

symbolic of the wider judgment that was to come. And because he knew that, he wept.

He wept over the response of men. He saw them in hardness and unbelief rejecting their last and only hope. He was the light of the world, but they would extinguish that light. He was the water of life, but they would spew him out of their mouth. He was the lamb of God, but he would be slain by them. And so he wept.

What he saw that day broke his heart and brought tears to his eyes. He looked at the souls of unbelieving people and tears began to flow. Nothing, I say nothing, save the cross itself shows the humanity and the heart of Christ quite like the savior weeping over the city of Jerusalem. If you ever doubt the compassion of Christ and the love of God for you and for our world, look at our savior weeping over an unbelieving and rejecting city.

He wept then and he weeps now. And there is enough injustice in the world to cause all of us to weep — crime, poverty, racism and abuse. If we would win our state we must have a heart like his. To paraphrase L. R. Scarborough, “We must have more weeping if we want more reaping in the church.” And to quote Charles G. Finney, “It is doubtful we will ever have revival until Mr. Amen and Mr. Wet Eye are back in church again.”

We have lost much of that compassion today. Leon Vorpahl told me, “We spend more time in our churches today praying to keep sick saints out of heaven than we do to keep the lost sinners out of hell.” It is right that we pray for the sick. But until our hearts are so moved over the lostness of men that we weep for them, they are not likely to be saved.

Why did the savior weep then? Why does he weep now? Why should we weep? He weeps, and we should weep:

- Over the condition of men
- Over the destiny of men
- Over the response of men

Breaking the Law and Breaking His Heart

First, we should weep over the condition of men. When our Lord looked at the city of Jerusalem, he saw men as lost in the darkness of sin and unbelief. The word “lost” is perhaps the saddest word in the English language. Many things can be lost. A child can be lost. Your health can be lost. Your reputation can be lost. Your fortune can be lost. But the greatest of all losses is to lose your soul. Jesus asked, “What is a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? And what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

What does it mean to be lost? Jesus told a story that gives us the answer. It was the story of a boy who said to his father, “Give me my part of the family inheritance and I’ll get out of your house and out of your hair forever.” Reluctantly his father agreed and the boy went into the far country where he wasted his inheritance in wild living. When everything was gone and he began to be in want, he realized the error of his way and resolved to go back home.

When the father saw him coming, he ran to meet him, and said to his servants, “This, my son, was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:1-24).

Jesus told this parable to help us understand both the loving heart of God and what it means to be lost. To be lost is to be away from the father. It is to be without God and without hope in the world. It is to be lost to hope, lost to happiness, lost to holiness, lost to heaven, lost to him.

And, every person, every man, every woman, every young person, without Jesus Christ is lost. Listen to God’s

word: “All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way” (Is. 53:6); “There is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not” (Ecc. 7:20). I assume that includes you! And, again, “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

David declared, “If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, oh Lord, who shall stand?” (Ps. 130:3). The original word for “mark” in the Hebrew means “to write out.” It is a bookkeeping term that means to enter into a ledger. If God should mark in the ledger book of eternity all of our sins and hold them against us, none of us could ever stand before him.

Not everyone, of course, understands this. Recently, former Texas governor Ann Richards spoke to a group of women about her victory over alcoholism. I admire her courage and her candidness in doing that, but in her speech she said something terribly wrong. She said, “Down deep in our hearts we are better than we think we are.”

The Lord would never agree with that. He said through his prophet Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately (incurably) wicked: who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9).

We are not better than we think we are. We are not even as good as we think we are. We are worse than we think we are. We are in rebellion against God and don’t even recognize it.

What is sin? Sin is not just breaking the law of God, it is breaking the heart of God. It is a raised hand, a clenched fist, a slap in the face of God.

But for our world lost in sin, I have good news. There is more love in God than sin in us. The tears of Jesus and the death of Jesus on Calvary’s cross reveal the extent to which God will go to forgive our sins (Rom. 5:6-8). They

are the most dramatic reminders of God's unmerited and unending grace. That is why we call the day of his crucifixion "Good Friday."

That is why we call the gospel "Good News."

God's Great Compliment

Second, we should weep over the destiny of men. Several years ago I visited the city of Hiroshima, Japan, the city where the first atomic bomb was dropped August 6, 1945. I was just eleven years old at that time, and though I understood what had happened, I did not fully realize the devastation it wrought until I read about it years later.

One hundred thousand people were killed that day. Sixty-two thousand of the 90,000 buildings in the city were destroyed. And it was estimated that temperatures at the center of the blast rose to heights of 6,000 degrees. The world had never witnessed such devastation.

As I stood on a high hill overlooking that vast city which by that time had been rebuilt, my mind raced back across the years to the heartache and devastation the people of Hiroshima suffered. I was overcome by emotion and I began to weep. I did not know a single person who had been killed or injured in the bombing, but my heart went out to them and the tears came unbidden.

This day Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem because he saw an approaching tragedy worse than that. In a few years Roman legions, under the command of Titus, emperor of the empire, would besiege the city and level it. The temple would be burned down and only the western wall, later called the Wailing Wall, would remain standing. It would be an act of divine judgment on the Jewish nation for their rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah. According to Josephus, over a million people would be slaughtered and 100,000

would be taken captive. After this the Jewish nation as a theocracy would be blotted out of existence.

But Jesus saw beyond that. He saw this as symbolic of God's eternal judgment upon sin. He saw where these people were going when they died, and that stirred his heart. It should stir our heart also.

Do you realize that all people without Jesus Christ are under the judgment of God? Every man, woman, and young person apart from Jesus Christ is headed for an eternity without God.

There is an insidious belief abroad in our world today called universalism. It is the belief that all people will go to heaven, that all spiritual roads lead to God. But don't you believe it.

Our instincts tell us that life does not end at the grave. We believe because we can't help it that there is a life beyond. All people everywhere believe that.

Logic tells us that not all people are going to the same place. I cannot believe that Mother Theresa and Madonna will suffer the same fate. I can't believe that Billy Graham and Sadaam Hussein are going to the same place. If so, there is no justice in the universe and thus there is no meaning in life.

And revelation tells us where people are going. Listen to Jesus, "Enter ye in at the straight gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because straight is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. 7:13-14).

There are two roads in life and two destinies in eternity. Everyone is on one of those two roads and will wind up in one of those two destinations.

"But," you say, "God would never allow a person to go

to hell.” Which God are you talking about? The God of the Bible or the God you have conjured up in your imagination. The God of the Bible is a consuming fire. The scriptures tells us, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” The scriptures tell us, “It is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment.” You must either take his word for it or you take a chance.

C. S. Lewis said, “There are two kinds of people in the world. Those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘Thy will be done.’”

“Hell,” wrote G. K. Chesterton, “is God’s great complement to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human personality.”

God so respects your right to choose that he would never force you to believe in him or to follow him. He speaks to us, convicts us, pleads with us, but he never forces us. He simply stands at our heart’s door to knock. He desires admission but he will never make a forcible entry.

But to people under judgment I have good news. The world says, “You made your bed, lie in it.” But our Lord says, “Take up your bed and walk.” Your sins can be forgiven and you can begin your journey to heaven today. You can put your faith and trust in the savior who weeps for you.

Despised and Rejected of Men

Third, we should weep over the response of men. Jesus had visited the city of Jerusalem frequently. He had demonstrated to the people over and over that he was the Messiah, the son of God. But every visit brought with it increased opposition from the religious leaders. By now the people had become so hardened and blinded in their rebellion that they would not believe. They would reject him finally and ultimately. Seeing that, he wept.

We should not be surprised at that. The prophet Isaiah, seeing into the future as though it had already happened, said of the Messiah, “He was despised and rejected of men” (Is. 53:3).

He was rejected by the inn keeper. When his parents came to Bethlehem they were told there was no room for them in the inn. He was rejected by the king. When news of his birth came to Herod, he ordered all male babies two years of age and younger to be put to death. He was rejected by his hometown. The people of Nazareth said, “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Joseph?” (Mark 6:3). And he could do no mighty works because of their unbelief. And he was rejected by his nation. Listen to John, the apostle, “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believed on his name” (John 1:11-12).

But, I’ve got good news for a rejecting world, “The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner” (Luke 20:17). Peter declared on the day of Pentecost, having preached the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made this same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

The same one rejected was the same one resurrected. The one nailed to the cross is now hailed as the Christ. Rejection is never easy to take. Some of you have gone through divorces you did not want. That’s a kind of rejection. Some of you were terminated from jobs you wanted to keep. That’s a form of rejection. Some of you parents have had your children turn their backs on your values. That’s a way of rejection. And some children never seem to be able to please their parents. That’s a type of rejection. And they

all hurt. Rejection always hurts and it hurt Jesus.

But though we have rejected him, he will not reject us if we come to him. Listen to the promise of acceptance from the Lord: “He that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). No one need ever fear rejection by him. He offers full and unquestioned acceptance to those who repent and believe.

Will you come to him today? Will you trust him as your savior? Will you look upon the weeping savior and know that he loves you not only enough to weep over you, but enough to die for you. If we are to win our state then we need to weep for all the lost as Jesus wept.

Spurgeon wrote what ought to be the heartbeat of every one of us.

*What the hand is to the lute,
What the breath is to the flute,
What is fragrance to the smell,
What the spring is to the well,
What the flower is to the bee,
That is Jesus Christ to me.*

*What the mother is to the child,
What the guide in pathless wild,
What is oil to troubled way,
What is ransom to the slave,
What is water to the sea,
That's what Jesus Christ is to me.*

Chapter 5

Witnessing: The Best Way to Witness

Luke 5:27-32

Shortly after I became a Christian, my church had a week-long study of the book, *Every Christian's Job* by C. E. Matthews, the first director of evangelism for the Southern Baptist Convention. It was a study of soul winning. So, early in my Christian life I realized that winning others to Christ was not to be left to the preachers alone. It was my responsibility, also.

The early church understood this and apparently the biblical writers did not feel any necessity to urge the new converts to witness. Evangelism just happened. It was the natural result of conversion.

There are many different kinds of evangelism. There is mass evangelism. John the Baptist and Simon Peter at Pentecost used this method. And Billy Graham uses it today.

There is organized evangelism. Jesus sent out of the twelve (Matt. 10:1-42), and later the 70 (Luke 10:1-17). He told them where to go, what to take, what to say, what to expect, and how to deal with rejection as they went from village to village.

There is literary evangelism. John's purpose in writing his gospel was that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ (John 20:31).

In our day we have added some new methods of evangelism — things like televangelism, and even bumper

sticker evangelism. I saw a bumper sticker the other day that posed an interesting question: “Where will you spend eternity? Smoking or non-smoking?”

But by far the most effective method of evangelism was and still is personal evangelism, one person telling another about Christ. Tony Campolo has a wonderful word for those who are “awed” by mass meetings. He reminds us that people are won to Christ the same way an insurance agent sells insurance — one on one. “If you look at people eyeball to eyeball, they’ll say, ‘Yes.’”

The road to hell is a gradual slope. Most people on it don’t even sense they are going downhill. If we would save our state we must return to this one-on-one, face-to-face kind of evangelism.

One of the best examples of such evangelism in scripture is Matthew. Immediately after Jesus called him to be his disciple, he gave a great feast at his home and invited his tax collector friends so they could meet his new friend, Jesus, also (Luke 5:27-32). This is evangelism at its best!

Tax collectors were among the most despised people of Jesus’ day. They were classified along with robbers, murderers, and harlots. And for a good reason. Palestine, at that time, was occupied territory. It had been conquered and was ruled by the Romans. Tax collectors had taken service under the Roman government; and therefore were regarded as renegades and traitors.

The taxation system lent itself to abuse. The Roman custom was to farm out its taxes. It assessed a district a certain figure, and then sold the right to collect the taxes within it to the highest bidder. So long as the buyer handed over the assessed figure at the end of the year, he was entitled to retain whatever else he could extract from the people; and since there was no way of making public announcements

which would reach everyone, the common man had no idea of what he had to pay. So, the unsuspecting public was often forced to pay exorbitant taxes and they could do nothing about it. Tax collectors were so despised that they were barred from the synagogues by the Jews.

Matthew was such a man, and when he realized Jesus was the savior he broke with Rome, gave up his sinful life, and became a follower of Christ. Then, out of deep gratitude, he gave a feast in Jesus' honor and invited his fellow tax-collectors and other outcast friends to meet Jesus. It was Matthew's first instinct to share the wonder he had found in Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees who saw it were filled with indignation. They wanted to know why Jesus would associate with the riffraff of the world. His answer is classic: "They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32).

Matthew's effort shows us the best way to witness:

- He teaches us the best technique to use.
- He teaches us the best testimony to give.
- He teaches us the best time to start.

And, if we would win our state, we need to follow his example.

Building Bridges of Friendship

First, Matthew teaches us the best technique to use in witnessing. He started with his circle of friends. Isn't that what you would expect? When we have a party to celebrate some event in our life, when we have good news to share, when we have been someplace enjoyable, found something helpful, experienced something meaningful, the first people we want to share it with are our friends.

It is the most natural thing in the world to immediately share good things with those we care about. That's why the best and most natural way to witness is to share the gospel with our friends.

Everyone who studies in the field of evangelism agrees on this. George Barna, who spends his time studying how to make churches more effective, said his research shows that most people who accept Christ are led to that conversion experience by the witness of another person — usually a friend. He found that personal relationships produce twice as many converts as do sermons, church services, and evangelistic events.

Barna doesn't poo-poo preaching. "Many who are led to Christ by friends," he acknowledges, "had also been exposed to great preaching, which encouraged them to take seriously the claims of Christ." But, "relying exclusively or even primarily upon preaching hinders his spirit. We must equip the saints to do the work of evangelism. Even without a public platform, they may be the most effective preachers of all."

Barna asked the question, "Which is more effective at bringing souls into the kingdom of God — a hell-fire and brimstone sermon or a calm conversation over a backyard fence?"

Then he gives us the answer: If you are concerned about the eternal salvation of your neighbor, hang around the fence. Personal witnessing is indisputably the most effective means of reaching people for Christ.

Why is this true? It is because personal witnessing builds upon an established relationship, which means that the recommendation or invitation springs from a credible source. More often than not, if the person being invited has an interest in the church, the mere fact that the church has

been endorsed by a trusted friend or an associate is sufficient to cause them to visit the church.

And, we all have a circle of friends. Dr. Rollo May has said that each of us encounters from 500 to 2,500 acquaintances every year. These are not friends; they are people who cross our lives. We know their names; we greet them, and may have a brief conversation with them, but they are only acquaintances.

A friend is someone with whom we share a common bond. They are people we value, we make time for, we pray for, we cry with, and have fun with. They include our relatives, business associates, class mates, and neighbors.

We never know what a friendship can do in the family of God. T. W. Wilson, Grady Wilson, and Billy Graham, were North Carolina boys who were friends. They brought one another to the Lord. Think what that friendship has meant to the kingdom of God. Significant things can happen when we bring our friends to God's house.

You will, of course, encounter indifference. Many are lost and do not seem to care. And you may be tempted to say, "Well, if they don't care about their soul, why should I care?" But we must not be indifferent to other people's indifference. Many times they will begin to care if they see that we really care. And, the fact that a person is not interested in Christ today does not mean he won't be interested tomorrow. We never know what may happen tomorrow. Tomorrow there may be a death in the family, tomorrow their kid may be busted for drugs, tomorrow they may lose their job, tomorrow they may get a bad biopsy report. Then suddenly the person who is not interested in Christ becomes interested.

Matthew's technique may not be the only way of evangelism, but it is probably the best way, and it is a way

we can all use.

An Open Nerve in Society

Second, Matthew teaches us the best testimony to give in witnessing. What did Matthew say to his friends when they came to dinner? We have no record of his exact words. However, we can be sure that he said at least two things by action and by word. First, he must have said, “I have met the savior and I want you to meet him, too. He loves me and accepted me and has forgiven me. Now I am a different person. I have given up my unhappy, wretched life and I have become his follower.” And he must have said, “He cares for the likes of us. What happened to me can happen to you. He will forgive your sins, accept you and give you a new reason for living, just as he did for me.”

That is our message also. Our message is not “come to church,” or “come hear our preacher,” or “you need to “straighten up your life morally.” Our message centers in Jesus Christ, what he has done for us, and what he can do for them.

Remember this, you are an expert at what God has done in your life. So tell your story. And we don’t have to have had a Damascus Road experience to do it effectively. Someone has said, “John was converted like a sunrise. Paul was converted like an earthquake. But they were both converted.” It doesn’t have to happen a certain way. It just has to happen.

I can identify with the man who went to hear an evangelist who had been converted from a life of underworld crime. As he heard the man preach, he came under conviction. He went home that night, got down on his knees, and prayed, “Dear Lord, I’ve never committed adultery. I’ve never robbed a bank. I’ve never killed anybody. I’ve never

lied to a grand jury. But if you can use me in spite of these shortcomings, then please do.”

The sharing of your testimony does two things: (1) It greatly fortifies the person who makes it and puts steel into their own decision. Remember, as the old preacher said, “If you can’t tell it, you ain’t got it.” And (2) it greatly moves the ordinary hearer of it, for living faith is one of the most contagious things in the world.

People will identify with it. It will have a note of authority about it since it happened to you. Just make it honest and believable and sincere. Keep the language simple so that non-church people can understand it, and remember all the while that the Holy Spirit will help you.

I hear someone say, “I will just live my faith.” Our lives ought to speak louder than our words. But as a matter of fact they do not, and perhaps cannot. For while our example may be potent, when we face trouble courageously or live an evidently disciplined and unselfish life, no mere life can give testimony to the riches of the Christian gospel.

I cannot, by being good, tell men of Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection, nor of my faith in his divinity. The emphasis is too much for me and too little for him. Our lives must be made as consistent as we can make them with our faith, but our faith, if we are Christians, is vastly greater than our lives. That is why the “word” of witness is so important. And that is why it is so important that the simplest of Christians know their faith, know some theology, and can give witness to what they believe about Jesus.

There is an open nerve in society that we can touch for Jesus Christ. Everyone has a problem or lives near one. They battle drugs or alcohol, have a difficult in-law, have someone desperately ill, have a feeling of futility about life in general, or have a hard decision to make — everybody

faces these things at times.

People want forgiveness of sin. In the television program, *Law and Order*, one of the detectives arrested a suspect in a multiple murder. His superior asked, “Do you have a confession?” The detective replied, “He says he’s not guilty of anything.” The superior replied, “Everybody is guilty of something. I want a confession.” People know they have failed. They know they are not the parents or the husband or the wife that they ought to be. And they feel guilty about it. They want and need forgiveness.

People are lonely. They may live in a crowded apartment, work in a crowded mall, and drive crowded streets, but still they are lonely and empty.

People have fractured relationships. They don’t get along with their spouse or their boss or their kids. They don’t relate or communicate as they should.

People are under pressure — economic pressure, family pressure, social pressure.

And people desire to make their life count. They want their lives to have significance. Too many people see no significance in their lives. They get up and they go to work and they come home after eight hours of work and their lives have no meaning beyond that. And, they know it. A lot of people get a job so they can get some money so they can pay the rent so they can get some food that will give them some strength to go to their job, so they can get some money to pay the rent and buy some food to give them strength to go to their job . . . Only the Lord can deliver us from that kind of meaninglessness and emptiness.

The world is in chaos and nobody knows how to make it right. In that kind of world Jesus offers us peace, inner peace. (John 14:27). We need to tell our friends about our friend, the prince of peace.

I Wondered If You'd Come

Third, Matthew teaches us the best time to witness. It was immediately after he was converted. You don't have to wait until you've memorized yards of scripture, earned a certificate in soul winning, or graduated from a seminary to witness.

If you have been converted, you have met the basic qualifications for witnessing. That is the pattern in the New Testament. In verse one of Acts chapter nine Luke said Paul was "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the church." In verse 20 it says, Paul was converted and "straightway" preached Christ in the synagogue. In twenty verses he went from persecutor to preacher. We can do the same thing.

The reason for this is that we probably have more non-Christian friends at the time of our conversion than we will ever have again. After we have been active in the church for a few years, we have few non-Christians in our circle of friends. As a deacon said to me recently, "I have no non-Christians in my circle of friends. All my friends are in the church." If that's true of you, you're spending too much time in church.

Every believer ought to build a relationship with at least one lost person. Golf with them, fish or hunt with them, eat or vacation with them. But get to know them so well that you can't stand for them to go to hell and so you find a way to tell them about Christ.

Jesus said we are to be in the world but not of the world (John 17:15-16). We can't spend all our time at the church house. We must mix and mingle in the world. The salt must get out of the shaker. The light must pierce the darkness. But we must do it without compromise. There is a difference in a boat being in the water and water being in

the boat. We must keep contact with a lost world if we are to win the world to Christ.

Years ago a prominent businessman in our city relocated his business. When he dedicated his new facilities he had an open house on a Sunday afternoon — a wine and cheese tasting party. I was among those invited. When I showed up, he said, “I was wondering if you would come. Jesus would have.”

I have never forgotten that. Jesus did attend the wedding at Cana of Galilee, and even helped with the refreshments. He was a friend of sinners and we must be, too.

Palmer Ofuoku, although not a Christian, was placed in a mission school in Nigeria because his parents thought he would receive a good education there. He attended the school for many years, but remained an adherent to traditional African religion. But one year a new missionary came to the school who became involved in the lives of the Nigerians. He brought a new quality of relationship and eventually he led Palmer to Jesus Christ. Later, Palmer explained the missionary’s influence this way: “He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across.” That is what every friend can do and ought to do.

In conclusion there is one interesting surmise to Matthew’s feast. Sometime later in the book of Luke we are told of Jesus going to Jericho, meeting Zacchaeus, and inviting himself to Zacchaeus’ home. That night Zacchaeus was saved. There is a strong possibility that Zacchaeus, one of Matthew’s fellow tax collectors, first met Jesus at this banquet. It is easy to believe that Zacchaeus was saved as a result of being invited to meet Jesus by his friend Matthew.

To meet Jesus is to want to share him — and this is the best way to do it — start now and tell your friends about

Jesus. If we would save our state we must do it.

Chapter 6

Worshipping: The Seeking God

John 4:23-24

When my daughter-in-law, Shaun, was on her deathbed, we told our eight-year-old grandson, Jordan, that we did not expect his mother to live. We were not aware of how much he understood, but the next day, as my wife drove him to the hospital, he asked, “Mimi, what if my daddy dies, will I have to go to one of those homes?” She replied, “What are you talking about? Are you talking about a foster home?” He replied, “Yes, that’s what I’m talking about.”

She replied, “Oh, no, you’d never have to go to one of those homes. You have me and P-Paul and your Nonny and your Grandpa, and Uncle Joey and Aunt Charlotte, and Aunt Lori and Uncle Kent. And we’d take care of you.” He then asked, “But what if all of you died except Uncle Kent?” (He was pushing it to the edge of the envelope. He wanted to know what would happen to him.)

She said, “Why Uncle Kent would take care of you.” Then Jordan asked, “But what if he couldn’t find me?” And she replied, “He would search the world over until he found you.”

When she told me that, I thought, “That’s a picture of the love of God.” God is the seeking God who keeps looking in hopes of finding every one of us. That loving search is the thrust of three stories Jesus told about God. The first is about a man who had 100 sheep. Ninety-nine were safe in

the fold and one was lost. He left the 99 and searched diligently until he found the one lost sheep and brought him safely home.

The second is about a woman who had ten coins. Nine were safely tucked away in her purse. But one had slipped out and was lost on the floor. On her hands and knees, by the light of a candle, she searched until she found the lost coin and then rejoiced in her good fortune.

Lastly, he told of a man who had two sons. One was lost. He paced the floor and pierced the horizons and prayed with all his heart until the wayward boy came home again. All three stories were told to help us understand God better. The God of the Bible is a seeking God, always after the lost. And he is looking for some of you right now.

The Lord not only seeks us for salvation, he also seeks us for worship. Jesus said, “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (John 4:23).

These words were spoken to a woman with a stained reputation, living among a despised people and a member of a religious sect. When Jesus met her, he knew her past. She had been married and divorced five times and now had a live-in boyfriend. If ever there was a woman you would think the Lord had no interest in, it would be this one.

But what Jesus saw was not so much her badness as her sadness. She had been looking for inner peace and contentment all of her life and thought it could be found in a new man, in a new marriage, in a new relationship. So she had flitted from man to man, marriage to marriage, relationship to relationship, looking for what she had never found. After all these men, her soul was as dry as ever.

Jesus spoke to her about the living water that could

quench her spiritual thirst. When she heard about this, she said, “Oh, sir, give me that water.”

Jesus then told her to go and get her husband. She responded, “I have no husband.” Jesus then revealed his knowledge of her past sin. She, like us, must face her sin before she could receive God’s forgiveness.

Her response was natural. She tried to change the subject. Looking toward Mt. Gerizim she said, “Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.”

She wanted to talk about theology, not her sin. That’s when Jesus spoke the words of this text.

Her question was about the place of worship. Jesus focused on the spirit and attitude of worship. It is not where you worship, but how you worship, that matters most. It must be of the heart and soul. We must worship God from the very essence of our being.

If Jesus were speaking this truth to us today, he would say, “It is not enough that you are here today. It is not enough for you to be in your place. It is possible to be absent at the very moment when you are taking up the most space. Your heart and soul must be attuned to God. You must meet him in your spirit.”

If we would win our state we must recapture true worship. We must worship him in spirit and in truth. I want you to key in on the sentence, “The Father seeketh such to worship him” (vs. 23). Why is God looking for worshippers? Why does he want us to open our heart to him? It is not because he needs it. It is for our benefit, not his.

There are five reasons why we should worship:

- We need to worship to meet God — to keep our priorities straight.

- We need to worship for forgiveness — to have our sins forgiven.
- We need to worship for encouragement — to be inspired to the highest kind of living.
- We need to worship for commitment — to hear and answer God’s call.
- We need to worship for fellowship — to gain strength for the burdens of life.

Writing in the Sand

First, we need to go to church to meet God — to keep our priorities straight. The late Jim Valvano, coach of North Carolina State’s basketball team, once pointed to Lorenzo Charles’ last-second dunk against Houston to give North Carolina State the 1983 NCAA title as the highlight of his life. But, all of that changed when he started receiving radiation and chemotherapy after he was diagnosed with cancer.

Valvano said, “Until you are faced with death itself, you don’t understand the difference between a basketball game and life and death. I realized how ephemeral and transitory sports fame can be.”

Our values change in the light of eternity. Worship doesn’t necessarily bring us face to face with eternity, but it does bring us face to face with the eternal. And that helps to keep our priorities straight.

All week long we deal with dollars and cents, gallons and pounds, inches and feet. Daily our concerns are about being late or getting a date; middle school or the car pool; football or study hall; building a house or pleasing your spouse; keeping your health or accumulating wealth; saving for tomorrow or having to borrow; keeping your job or getting robbed. If we aren’t careful we will get confused

and get to thinking that's all there is to life.

But, when we worship, we put life back in focus. We realize that the spiritual and the eternal are the things that really count. The things that matter most must never be at the mercy of the things that matter least. If we ever get more than seven days from God our life tends to get out of focus.

Whoopee or Woe Is Me?

Second, we need to worship for forgiveness — to experience the cleansing of our sins. The human nose has been the object of a lot of sayings through the years. We talk about keeping our nose to the grindstone, paying through the nose, or nothing being plainer than the nose on your face. The truth is, the nose is a very important and complex organ of the body. It, along with sight, hearing, taste, and touch, form our five senses.

The main job of the nose is, of course, the detection of odors. Most people can recognize 4,000 different scents. The really sensitive nose can go up to about 10,000. But, if you get a job in the stockyards or a paper mill, the oppressive odor you smell at first is soon hardly noticed. You remain sensitive to other odors, but you get adjusted to the harsh smells around you and you hardly notice them anymore.

Sin is like that. We get used to it. We live all week in a world of vulgar speech, pornography, sleeping around, shady deals and dishonesty. If we aren't careful we lose our sensitivity to sin around us and within us.

But, we cannot see God without seeing ourselves and our sin. The best example of worship in the Bible is Isaiah's experience in the temple. It was in the year that king Uzziah died that Isaiah saw the Lord on his throne, high and lifted up. His glory filled the temple. When he saw God, Isaiah

heard the seraphims cry, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts” (Is. 6:3). Then Isaiah said, “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the king, the lord of hosts” (vs. 5).

When he saw the holiness of the Lord he also saw the sinfulness of his own life.

A part of what troubles me about modern worship is there is too much emphasis on celebration and not enough emphasis on this kind of confrontation. There is too much “whoopie!” and not enough “woe is me!”

But, worship is not just to confront us with our sin. It is to bring us to a place of confession and cleansing. So, before Isaiah left church, the Lord had laid live coals on his lips and said to him, “Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged” (vs. 7). Your sins can be purged also, and when worship is complete, that happens.

Go and Claim It!

Third, we need to worship for encouragement — to be inspired to the highest kind of living. The scriptures say, “Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more as we see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25).

The word “provoke” used here means to stimulate. We all need encouragement to the highest kind of living. There is much encouragement to the lowest kind of living everywhere and everyday. But where can we go for encouragement to love, to be honest, to live in purity, to sacrifice, except to church.

The minister and his wife slipped away to the mountains for a few days' rest. They wanted to get away from the pressure and relax. They sat down at the restaurant for dinner when they noticed a gentleman going from table to table, greeting the diners. The minister said to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come over here." But he did. He shook the minister's hand and welcomed him to the restaurant. "What is your work?" he asked. "I'm a minister," the vacationer answered. The gentleman volunteered, "I've got a preacher story for you." With that he pulled up a chair and began his tale.

"I was born just a few miles from here, across the mountain. My mother was not married at the time, and the criticism leveled at her was also leveled at me. They had a name for me when I started to school, and they used it quite often. I can remember many times going off to myself at recess and lunchtime because the taunts of my peers cut so deep.

"What was even worse was going to town with my mother on Saturday afternoon. I could feel all those eyes piercing through me, and I could hear them whispering, 'I wonder whose child he is? I wonder who his father is?'

"When I was about twelve, a new preacher came to the church in our little community. People began to talk about his power and his eloquence and his compassion. I began to go to church myself. The pastor really intrigued me. But I always slipped in late and tried to get out early, because I didn't want anyone to see me and say, 'What is a boy like you doing in a place like this?'

"One Sunday I slipped up. The benediction was over before I realized it, and I found myself in a crowd with the people trying to get out of the building. As I was waiting there, scared to death, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned

around and there was the preacher, looking through me with those burning eyes. He said, ‘Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?’ And I thought to myself, ‘Oh, no, here we go again.’

“But then a smile of recognition broke across his face and he said, ‘Wait a minute, I know who you are. The family resemblance is unmistakable. You’re a child of God!’

“With that he patted me across the rump and said, ‘Boy, that’s quite an inheritance. Go and claim it.’

“That one statement,” the old gentleman concluded, “literally changed my whole life.”

The enthralled minister asked, “Who are you?” The old man replied, “My name is Ben Hooper.”

Who is Ben Hooper? This Ben Hooper, born in illegitimacy, went on to become the twice-elected governor of the state of Tennessee. It all began with a preacher in a little country church who dared to be involved in the ministry of encouragement.

There are Ben Hoopers all around us, every day. A word of encouragement and a loving pat can put them back on their feet again.

My own story and experience with church is very much like that. I grew up in a non-Christian, non-church-going family. When I began going to church as a teenage boy, I found love and encouragement there. The people in the church actually believed in me more than I believed in myself. And, I think they wanted me to succeed more than I wanted to succeed myself. My preacher, John Wright, a cracker salesman named Elmer Nelson, a carpenter, George Strickland, a refinery worker, Joe Deloche, all helped me. You’ll never find their name written in history books or in a hall of fame, but they were God’s instruments of encouragement to me.

What they did for me, I want to do for others. And, I want you to do that for others, too. Tell them — the poor, the divorced, the battered, the children — wherever you see them, “You’ve got quite an inheritance, go and claim it!”

Yes, But Can You Hear Him?

Fourth, we need to worship for commitment — so we can hear and answer the call of God. Every life needs a compelling commitment to be complete. Jesus said, “Whosoever seeks his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, the same shall find it” (Matt. 16:25 or Mark 8:35 or Luke 9:24 or Luke 17:33). The way of life is the way of commitment to a worthy cause. And we are more likely to find that in worship than in any other place.

So when we worship God we’re not only confronted with our sin, but we are confronted with his call to our life. When Isaiah confessed his sin, the Lord asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And Isaiah responded, “Here am I Lord, send me.”

Nearly every time people cry to God for help, God’s answer is his people. In all of scripture we find people crying out to God, and God says, “I have seen, I have heard, and I’m coming down to help you.” Then he takes someone, usually unknown and unimpressive, and says, “Come here, you are my answer.”

We all need to hear and answer the call of God. But, we must be still to hear him. A sign on the office wall of a Jewish friend said, “There is always music amongst the trees in the garden, but our hearts must be very quiet to hear it.” The psalmist said something like that when he wrote, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).

Interestingly enough, the psalmist’s statement was made

in the context of raging rivers and raging rulers, in the context of turbulent weather and a turbulent world. Sound familiar?

In that kind of world we need to slow down to hear him. That's why we need to worship.

Help for the Storms

Fifth, we need to worship for fellowship — to gain strength for the load of life. We need strength for the week and the weak. Some people carry heavy loads on their back and some people carry heavy loads in their heart.

There is help for the heavy hearted. The author of Hebrews invites us, “Let us therefore (because of Jesus, our high priest) come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

The word “help” is the same word used in Acts 27:17 to describe the sailors undergirding the ship on which Paul sailed. It was caught in a storm and about to be driven aground, where it would be wrecked. So, they put ropes around the hull to undergird it. Just so, in the storms of life God wraps his arms of grace around us to undergird and strengthen us.

In Ezekiel 46:9 the Lord gave his people some regulations for worship. When they came to worship they were not to depart out the same gate they entered in. The purpose of this regulation was to ensure an orderly flow of traffic. But, there is a spiritual message for us. We are not to leave worship the same way we came in.

In fact, when we worship God in spirit and in truth, we leave more focused, cleansed, committed, encouraged and strengthened than ever.

We all need that. That's why the Lord “seeks” such to worship him.

Chapter 7

Loving: Christians Out of Joint

1 Corinthians 1:10-18; 3:1-9

The roadside marquee read: “Forgive us.” What made the sign so unusual was that it was placed there by a church. The place where people so often go to find forgiveness was itself asking for forgiveness.

What was behind this most unusual act? It was an effort on the part of the church to atone for its factious past. The church had once been a thriving congregation. But over its 35-year history so many conflicts had seeped out from personal disagreements and spilled over into business meetings and flooded the entire membership that the church was all but dead. The church had suffered a loss of members every time it took a hit until it had now hit bottom. Attendance had declined from 400-500 a few years ago to about 40. And the church had just forced its last pastor, the ninth in 35 years, to resign. Devastated by its losses the church was now owning up to its past sins and had set out to make things right.

Spurgeon once said, “I believe every Christian has a choice of being humble or being humbled.” I think the same is true of churches. Whichever the case may be in this instance, the church was now humbly asking God and the community to forgive it — to forgive it for sinning against God; to forgive it for hurting people; to forgive it for misrepresenting Christ and the gospel to the world.

If every church in America that needed to ask for forgiveness for quarreling and fighting did so there would suddenly be such a shortage of marquee letters that no other business would be able to advertise that way.

The Bible is, of course, no stranger to strife. There are at least 133 stories in the Bible about conflict between individuals and groups, both in and out of the church. While strife is evidently a common part of life it clearly does not belong in the church. The one place where there ought to be peace and harmony, love and acceptance is in the family of God. A church at civil war is a poor representative of Christ and almost totally ineffective at reaching the lost or unenlisted. If, therefore, we would win our state, our churches must build and maintain warm and loving fellowships. We must have unity in our churches and our convention.

Being unified does not mean we agree on everything. What it means is we are committed to a cause that is more important than our differences. We freely express our convictions. We speak the truth to one another in love. And then we put aside our personal preferences and differences and do what is best or what the majority feels is best for the cause. And we don't gloat when we win or pout when we lose. It is not a matter of our winning or losing but the good of the cause — his kingdom.

Almost every book in the New Testament speaks to this. Look at what the scriptures say:

- “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (Gal. 5:14-15).
- “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and

clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:31-32).

- "...if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Col. 3:13).
- "Finally, brethren ... be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you. Greet one another with an holy kiss" (2 Cor. 13:11-12).
- "Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves" (Phil. 2:2-3).
- And finally, "Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another" (Rom. 12:9-10).

But the apostle Paul addresses this issue most succinctly in his letter to the Corinthian church. He had established the church in an 18-month long ministry in the city. Having finished his work among them he left a thriving congregation to continue his second missionary journey. He was followed in the church by several other outstanding Christian leaders. Among them were Apollos, the brilliant and eloquent Alexandrian Jew, who was mighty in the scriptures (Acts 18:24) and Simon Peter who was recognized as one of the pillars of the early church (Gal. 2:9).

In time, members of the household of Chloe brought word to Paul that there was a serious conflict in the church

that was about to split the fellowship. Out of deep concern Paul wrote to the church: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we all speak the same thing and that there be no division among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10).

The word “division” in the original language describes a garment that is rent into pieces. It meant “to split” or “to tear.” Paul felt that the church was on the verge of being torn asunder by disagreements. His appeal was that they be perfectly “joined” together. The word “joined” is a medical term. It means “to set in place.” It describes what a doctor does when you go to him with a broken bone. He sets the two parts of the bone back in right relationship with one another so it can knit and heal.

The church at Corinth, because of these divisions, was out of fellowship with God and with one another. The members needed to be set back into right relationship with one another and their broken relations healed.

What was the church about to split over? It was over its leadership. While Paul was clearly the spiritual father of the congregation there were some who had been swept off their feet by the eloquent Apollos and others who wanted the church to take on a more Jewish flavor had lined up behind Peter. Still others said they were followers only of Christ. That claim ought to have been a unifying factor, but it was not. This group obviously felt a superiority to everyone else. They were, in all probability, a rigid, self-righteous group who could be described as intolerant of everyone else.

Clearly the church at Corinth had slipped off center. The people had forgotten to whom their allegiance belonged. The same thing can happen to us today. Paul reminds them,

and us, that our allegiance is to Christ and he is not divided.

The early church almost divided over its benevolence program (Acts 6:1). Later the Jerusalem church almost divided over doctrine (Acts 15:1-2). Now the Corinthian church is about to split over its leadership.

Today churches are in conflict over women in ministry, worship style, and the ordination of homosexuals and lesbians. But probably more churches still split over the question of leadership than any other one thing. Almost every church conflict either begins there or it soon gravitates there. That's why Paul's appeal to this church is apropos for us today.

Paul bases his appeal on three things. These are the reasons why our churches need to live together in peace and harmony.

- Because of our relationship to Christ
- Because of our maturity in Christ
- Because of our work for Christ

Spiritual Brothers

First, we need to live together in love and unity because of our relationship to Christ. Twice in this passage (vs. 10-11) Paul addresses them as "brothers." This is one of five names used in scripture for Christians. They are called believers, disciples, servants, saints, and brothers. They are called believers for their faith; disciples for their knowledge; servants for their works; saints for their holiness; and brothers for their love.

Paul, of course, uses the term "brothers" here in a spiritual sense. Men, as you know, can be brothers in two ways — physically and spiritually.

Being brothers in a physical sense is no guarantee that they will live together in harmony. In fact, some of the

most fierce conflicts in scripture occurred between brothers. In the first recorded murder in history Cain, out of jealousy and resentment, slew his brother Abel. Then, reading like a modern day mystery, the Bible tells us he hid his brother's body in a place known only to God (Gen. 4:1-10).

Jacob took advantage of the weakness of his brother, Esau, and cheated him out of his birthright as the eldest son and then deceived his blind father to receive the family blessing. He then was forced to flee the land of Canaan and live for years in exile to escape his brother's rage (Gen. 27-33).

Joseph, because of the favoritism shown him by his father and because of his seemingly haughty spirit, was so resented by his brothers that they plotted to kill him. At the last minute they sold him to a slave caravan traveling to Egypt and then told their father he had been killed by wild beasts (Gen. 37).

Jesus told the story of a man who came to him asking, "Lord, speak to my brother that he divide his inheritance with me." Obviously the father had died and his brother felt cheated out of his part of the family inheritance. He was asking Jesus to arbitrate the case (Luke 12:13-14).

And, in what is perhaps the most familiar story in the Bible, Jesus tells of a man who had two sons. The younger one was wild and reckless. The older brother was respectful and responsible. The younger one went away into the far country. The older brother stayed home with his father. In time the rebellious son came to his senses and came home repentant, asking his father for forgiveness. When his older brother learned of the prodigal's return and the joyous welcome the father was giving him, he was angry and resentful. Pouting and sulking he refused to go in and join in the celebration welcoming his brother home. Even though

his father begged him to come in he refused to do so (Luke 15:11-32).

So, being physical brothers is no guarantee of peace and harmony between people. But being spiritual brothers should be different. Through faith in Jesus Christ we can become the sons of God and thus brothers in Christ. We often speak of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. There is a sense in which that is true of all people. But in the strictest sense it is only as we are subject to a common father that we are brothers. To become brothers we have to first become sons.

Are you one of God's children? So am I. That makes us brothers or sisters in Christ. And so is everyone else who is a believer. If for no other reason, for the sake of our father, because he wills it, we ought to love one another and live and serve together in harmony. We hurt him and we betray our family name when we act like unregenerate brothers.

Spiritual Growth

Second, we ought to live together in peace and harmony because of our maturity in Christ. Paul, again addressing them as brethren, says, "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? (1 Cor. 3:1, 3).

According to scripture there are two classes of people in the world — lost and saved. And, there are two classes of saved — carnal and spiritual, those who are babes in Christ and those who are mature in Christ.

Once we become the children of God he expects us to grow to be like his son, Jesus Christ. Clearly the goal of the

Christian life is not just to get us off the road to hell and into heaven, but to make us more and more like him.

It is to this end that we are saved. It is to this end that God causes all things to work together in our lives (Rom. 8:28-29). It is to this end that the Lord gives gifted leaders to his church (Eph. 4:11-13).

Admittedly that takes time. A man was teasing a little boy about his infant brother and asked, "Can he talk?" "No sir," was the reply.

"Can he feed himself?" "No sir," answered the boy.

"Can he dress himself?" "No sir," he responded.

"Can he help around the house?" "No sir."

"Well then, what good is he?" the man asked. To which the little boy replied, "Gosh, mister, just give him some time!"

Immediately after conversion the life and conduct of a new Christian may not be all that different from his former life. After all he still lives in the same house, works the same job, has the same vocabulary, and is subject to the same habits. Only his desires and commitment have changed. It may take a while for his new nature to show through.

Remembering that growth takes time should cause us to be patient with our fellow believers, especially those new in the faith. But in time they and we should become more and more like him. That means we become more loving and gracious. I have to wonder about the validity of the faith of anybody who claims to have been a Christian for a reasonable period of time and has not grown kinder, gentler, and more understanding.

If we shout and pout at one another, if we battle and tattle with one another, if we fuss and cuss to one another, we show just how carnal, how childish, and how immature

we are.

The simple fact is you can tell what a man's relationship to God is by looking at his relationships to his fellow man. If a man is at variance with his fellow man, if he is quarrelsome and argumentative ... even if he attends church every time the doors are open ... even if he tithes ... even if he's an officer in the church ... even if he stands in the pulpit ... he is not the man of God he ought to be. He is carnal. He is immature. He has never "grown up" in Jesus Christ.

I read a book years ago entitled *Grow Up Or Blow Up*. The book asserted that civilization must mature or else destroy itself. With the explosive power of hundreds of atomic bombs greater than those used in World War II, destruction is possible. It is the same in our churches. We must either grow up or we will blow up.

Spiritual Ministry

Third, we should live together in peace and harmony because of our work for Christ. Paul reminds us, "We are laborers together with him" (3:9). To him the focus needs always to be on the work, not on the workers; on the harvest, not on the laborers.

The right focus would solve most of the problems we have in our churches. I now live in Tyler, Texas, the Rose Capital of America and the hometown of Earl Campbell. In his senior year at John Tyler High School he led his team to a state championship. He was recruited by the University of Texas where he became the Heisman Trophy winner. He then went on to an all-pro career with the Houston Oilers.

In his biography, *The Tyler Rose: The Earl Campbell Story*, Earl tells of coach Fred Akers who recruited him for the University of Texas. He said, "Coach Akers is a nonsense man, especially when it comes to football and his

players. The first order of business was to meet with each of his players to inform them of exactly what he expected from them, individually and as a part of the team.”

“I need to know, Mr. Campbell,” Coach Akers said, “do you want to run the ball for this university?” That was a fair question. Some athletes can’t seem to decide whether they want to run the football or to run the university.

Earl was taken off guard by the question, especially since he believed everyone knew that his sole purpose for living was to run the football for the Longhorns. “Yes sir, I do ... real bad,” was Earl’s simple response.

Earl Campbell was a great football player, in part because of his focus. We need to remember what we were recruited to do. We were not recruited to run the kingdom of God. We weren’t recruited to run the Convention. We weren’t even recruited to run our church. We were recruited to run with patience the race that is set before us (Heb. 12:1) and to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. And if we would focus on that there would be less contention among the players when we huddle together in the church or at a convention.

On the eve of the Gettysburg Address Lincoln said in despair, “This war must end. What good is a nation living in freedom if all its children are dead?”

Just so, our church and denominational wars must end. What good will come from them if we have lost all of our institutions, if we’ve lost many of our members, if we have lost our impetus for world evangelism, if we’ve lost the respect of the unbelieving world? How can we declare to the world that we serve a God of love if we do not love one another? And how can we take the gospel to the world if we dissipate all our energy on in-fighting?

We should never be content to tear down. Our role and mission is to build up — to build up the kingdom of God; to build up the body of Christ. Both demand cooperative effort and a loving spirit.

On the plains of western Canada, early in the fall of the year, during the grain harvest season, a little three-year-old girl wandered from the yard of her farm home out into the tall grain and became lost. As night fell and the cold became more intense, the child's father and dozens of neighbors searched frantically through the field in a fruitless effort to find her. Finally one of the men called the search to a halt, and suggested that they all join hands and go systematically, like a giant combine, through the field. This they did, and finally in the bitter cold hours just before dawn, the child's lifeless body was found. The little girl had succumbed to exhaustion and cold. In anguish her poor, grief-stricken father cried out, "Oh, God, if we had only joined hands sooner!"

The world is lost and dying. We must join hands together to reach it for Christ. We simply must not be so engaged in quarreling with one another that we lose focus on our real mission, which is to reach our world for Christ.

Do you have any contention with a brother in Christ? Are you angry, unforgiving toward a fellow believer? If you're out of joint with your brother, you are out of joint with God. The need then is for you to be brought back into a right relationship with both and the rift healed.

If you desire reconciliation and healing here are three steps you can take.

First, confrontation. Go to the person and resolve the issue between the two of you. When you go never accuse. Simply ask, “Is there some contention between us?” If they say, “Yes,” then you deal with the issue. If they say, “No,” then say, “This is what I have heard ... or felt.” Then you deal with the issue (Matt. 5:23-24).

Second, mediation. Invite a third party to help facilitate your decision. This was Paul’s advice about the conflict between Euodias and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3). He asked the church to help these women resolve their differences.

Third, arbitration. This is invoking a third party to intervene and make the decision for you. If a person refuses to listen to the small group’s concerns, Jesus instructed the church to intervene. Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 6:1-5 suggest that for ordinary matters, a wise person serving as an arbitrator should be able to decide disputes between one believer and another.

What about you? Is there anyone with whom you have an unresolved issue? Go, then, and resolve the issue today. Go prayerfully. Go lovingly. Go humbly. But go! Do it for your sake. Do it for their sake. Do it for the gospel’s sake. Do it for God’s sake.

Chapter 8

Believing: The Power of Faith

Hebrews 11:1-3, 6

Mark Beltaire said, “Strike from mankind the principle of faith and man has no more history than a flock of sheep.” Faith, believing in the trustworthiness, the reliability, of a person or thing, is the basis of almost everything we do. Driving a car, flying in a plane, banking, eating in a restaurant, or going to a doctor. As somebody has said, “We go to a doctor we don’t know; he gives us a prescription we can’t read; we take it to a pharmacist we don’t see; he fills it with medicine we’ve never heard of; and we take it. And all by faith.”

Religious faith is similar. While the Bible gives us a technical definition (Heb. 11:1-2), simply stated it is confident assurance in God. It is believing not only that God can but that God will do what he says. And our walk with him is to be a walk of faith, for “Without faith” the scriptures say, “it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6).

We best understand faith, however, not by definition, but by example. And Abraham is one of our best examples.

Abraham was one of the great men of all times. He is considered the father of three world religions — Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Two of the greatest compliments in the Bible are paid to Abraham. James calls him “a friend of God” (James 2:23). And the apostle Paul calls him “the father of those

who believe” (Rom. 4:11).

Abraham’s walk of faith began with the summons of God. The Lord said to him, “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will show thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3).

The summons was to follow and obey. The promise was three-fold: “I will make you a great nation; give you a great name; and make you a great blessing.” And, from our vantage point 4,000 years later, we know that eventually Abraham fathered the Jewish race, through which the Messiah came. And through him all the world has been blessed.

Inherent in God’s promise to Abraham was that a son would be born. It had to be. Abraham and Sarah had no children. How could a great nation come from him unless he had a son who would perpetuate his name? Only by this could he father a great nation, only by this means could all the world be blessed through him.

When God’s call came, Abraham was a wealthy and distinguished citizen with great herds, great flocks and servants. He lived in Ur of the Chaldees, the world trade center of that day. It was wealthy, populous and sophisticated — advanced in mathematics, astronomy, organized government, sculpture, art, and banking, it had great libraries with a dictionary and other writings.

Leaving would be hard enough, but to top it off, Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah was 65 when God’s call came. At a time when most men are thinking of social security, Abraham was called to embark on a life of

insecurity.

Acting only on the inner voice of God, he pulled up stakes, left his homeland and followed established trade routes to the land of Canaan (Israel today). This was not aimless wandering. This was no casual drifting of a nomad looking for pasture. This was no money-seeking venture of a merchant prince. This was a religious act. It was “By faith that he obeyed God and went out not knowing whither he went” (Heb. 11:8).

He went out without precedent, without example, without scripture. Abraham had no Abraham to follow as an example. That’s why he is called the father of those who believe.

Many times Abraham’s faith would be tested. Once he went into Canaan there arose a famine. So he moved to Egypt to escape it. He had enough faith to follow God to Canaan, but not enough to stay there.

In Egypt, Pharaoh saw Sarah’s beauty and wanted her in his harem. Abraham, afraid for his life, lied, saying she was his sister. In Pharaoh’s harem she could bear Abraham no son. Abraham had enough faith to take his wife, but not enough to keep her.

When Pharaoh learned Sarah was his wife, he sent them out of Egypt. Back in Canaan, fourteen years passed. Now Abraham was 89 years old and Sarah was 79. The father of nations was still childless.

Impatient, Sarah encouraged Abraham to have a child with his servant girl, Hagar, so Ishmael was born. Abraham had enough faith to believe God, but not enough to wait on God.

From the birth of Ishmael, there was strife between Sarah and Hagar. And Ishmael has been the source of strife ever since. Ishmael, the illegitimate son of Abraham and Hagar,

is considered the father of the Arabs. It would be through Isaac, his legitimate son, that the Jewish nation would come. The conflict between Arabs and Jews is well documented.

Daily we hear about Hebron in the media. That's because it is the burial place of Abraham and Sarah and holy to both Jews and Arabs. They both lay claim to Israel as the sons of Abraham.

Twenty-five years have passed since God's promise was given. Abraham is now 99 and Sarah is 89 and still they have no son. Sarah is well beyond child-bearing age. When the Lord finally announces a son will be born, they both laugh at him. They had enough faith to listen to God, but not enough to not laugh at him. But, who wouldn't laugh? It was like saying a child would be born in the geriatrics ward and the bill would be picked up by Medicare. It was preposterous!

But, God rejuvenated Sarah's body and when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90, Isaac, the son of promise, was born. Someone has said, faith sees the invisible, believes the impossible, and receives the incredible. So it was with Isaac. He was the embodiment of God's word. If God was going to make good on his promise, a son was necessary. Now he has one.

The greatest test of Abraham's faith was yet to come. When Isaac was a lad, the Lord told Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love," to the top of Mt. Moriah and offer him as a sacrifice. Mt. Moriah is the location of the city of Jerusalem. On it the temple of Solomon would one day be built. Today, the dome of the rock, the second most sacred mosque of Islam, stands there.

The consequences were awesome. If Abraham obeyed God it would not only mean the death of his son, it would also mean the death of the promise. For without Isaac, the

rest of the promise could not be fulfilled.

Once again, Abraham acted by faith. We don't know how old Isaac was at that time, but he was old enough to walk up the mountain, old enough to gather and carry wood. When preparations for the sacrifice were complete, Isaac asked, "Father, where is the lamb for sacrifice?" And Abraham replied, "My son, God will provide himself a sacrifice."

He then put Isaac on the altar, drew back his knife to plunge it into his bosom, when God stopped him, saying, "Abraham, there's a lamb caught in the thicket. I have provided it as an offering to me." You know the rest of the story. In time Isaac married and had a family. His family multiplied until it became a nation and eventually, through that nation, Jesus, the savior, was born. And it was all due to faith. Abraham heard the call of God, took him at his word and obeyed his commands. If we would win our state we must have Abraham's kind of faith.

There are several things his life teaches us about the faith we need. Consider three of them:

- If we exercise faith in God, he will abide with us.
- If we exercise faith in God, he will confide in us.
- If we exercise faith in God, he will provide for us.

The Word of a Gentleman

First, if we exercise faith, God will abide with us. The scriptures say of Abraham, "By faith he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb. 11:8). While Abraham didn't know the "whither" he did know the "whom." He didn't know where he was going, but he knew who he was going with. And because he knew his destiny, he didn't have to worry about the destination. God was with him.

The promise of scripture is that when we walk by faith,

God will abide with us. He will walk by our side. The people of God, down through the years, have found comfort and strength in this

David Livingston was a great missionary. For 42 years he planted his life in the black continent. Some men set themselves to evangelize; some make it their business to explore; others feel called to emancipate, but Livingston undertook all three!

No man ever set himself at a more difficult task. And no man ever comforted his life with more serene and joyous confidence. At times he was surrounded by hostile savages. At times he was stalked by wild animals. At times his body was so wracked with pain he could hardly keep going. Death, disease, disappointment and discouragement were his constant companions. And what kept him going? Again and again he came back to his favorite text upon which he staked his life, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the earth.”

A thousand times or more he would put his finger on that verse and say, “It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honor, so there’s an end of it.”

Anchored to the promise, Livingston kept going. So did David. Listen to him, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me” (Ps. 23:4).

But you say, “If I could just see him, it would help.” The movie, “The Preacher’s Wife,” is about an angel named Dudley, who came back to earth to help a discouraged black inner-city pastor. When his work was finished, he became invisible to those he had helped and they had no memories of him — no one except the preacher’s little boy, Jeremiah.

Faith is believing that God walks beside us, even when we can't see him.

Step Up to the Door

Second, if we exercise faith, God will confide in us. A sad chapter in Abraham's life came when he and his nephew, Lot, could no longer work together. In a magnanimous act he gave Lot his choice of grazing land and he would take what was left. Lot chose the fertile plains that included Sodom and Gomorra. These were great and wicked cities, so perverse in fact that today there is a sin that bears the name of one of them. It's the sin of sodomy.

When Lot left the company of Abraham, "he pitched his tent toward Sodom." It wasn't long until he moved into Sodom. Shortly thereafter, Sodom moved into him. He and his family felt right at home with the evil around them. Excessive sin invites judgment and God accommodated it. As the Lord prepared to destroy the cities, he said, "Shall I hide from Abraham the things which I do?" (Gen. 18:17). He then revealed to Abraham what his plans were. God confided in him. And he did it more than once (Gen. 15:8, 13).

It is the same with us. If we will follow and obey God, he will not only abide with us, he will confide in us. He will show us his ways (Prov. 3:5-6). But God never shows us in advance. We must follow him and obey him before he will open the door.

I shop at Brookshires in Bergfield shopping center almost every week. The store has an automatic door that opens when you walk up to it. But you must get close before it opens. If you stand afar off, you can wait for ever and it won't open. You have to walk up to it for it to work.

It is the same with God. He shows us his way only as we walk up to him in faith. He doesn't show us what to do five years or even two years down the road. He just shows us the door. And if we walk to it he will open it. He will show us the way.

Jehovah is Still God

Third, if we exercise faith, God will provide for us. When Abraham and Isaac were going up the mountain, Isaac asked, "Father, where is the sacrifice?" And Abraham replied, "God will provide himself a sacrifice."

There is a principle here we must remember: When God guides, he always provides. I'm not a mystic. I don't have dreams and visions. I have never seen the 900-foot Jesus. I am a skeptic by nature. But I've seen this principle work again and again — when God guides, he provides.

In my former pastorate, there came a time when I believed our church should get more involved in local missions work. But we had debt we needed to pay off. So I launched an effort to raise the funds necessary to be debt-free. We would use the money we saved in interest for local missions. While we were in the process of raising the funds needed, three mission opportunities were literally given to us without our seeking any of them.

First, a Korean pastor from Houston called to say there were a number of Koreans living in Tyler and wondered if we would sponsor a Korean mission. With that phone call we had our first mission. When God guides, he provides.

Smith Association had been sponsoring the First Mexican Baptist Church for years and the work was struggling. It needed the supervision of a local church. Missionary Robert Jenkins asked if we would sponsor it. We now had two missions. When God guides, he provides.

Sylvania Baptist Church had so declined that it had only about twenty in Sunday School. They could not pay their bills. They were ready to disband. Pastor Rufus Wilmon asked if we would take them as a mission. We now had our third mission. While we were raising money to pay off our debt so we could get into local missions, three missions were handed to us. When God guides, he provides.

Sylvania Church is now running 400 in Sunday School and planning their third building, a new sanctuary to accommodate the crowds.

With three missions, I needed someone to direct them. The very Sunday we received the offering that would pay off our debt, Curtis Baker visited our worship services. Afterwards he said to me, "I'm going to move my business from Dallas to Lindale, and my secretary's husband is the assistant missions director at First Baptist in Dallas." I had studied their program for ideas to use in ours. He continued, "I don't know if you're interested in local missions, but if you are and if you like this man, I will give you \$25,000 a year for the next five years, to pay his salary. And I'll give you \$12,000 for local mission work." I had never met Curtis Baker before that day. We hired the man and he led our missions program. When God guides, he provides.

I felt we also needed to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, and heal the sick, as well as house a black church. There was a church building in north Tyler that had been repossessed by the FSLIC. It was perfect for our needs. I asked the FSLIC what they were asking for it, but they

couldn't tell me. An independent appraiser estimated its worth at about \$70,000. It would also need about \$10,000 in repairs.

We set a high attendance goal of 3,000 in Sunday School for our church anniversary and I asked everyone to bring a gift of \$20 extra that day. (That, by the way, was only the price of a hamburger, fries and a large coke once a week for a month.)

If they would, we could have an offering of \$60,000 for the building. I knew some of our people were retired and living on a pension, and some singles were living on a shoestring. I told them not to worry. If they didn't have \$20, they could bring \$10. If they didn't have \$10, they could bring \$5. If they didn't have \$5, they could bring \$1. But I asked everyone to bring something extra.

We received \$72,000 extra as an offering that day. But we still didn't know what the building would cost. Three weeks later the FSLIC said we could have it for \$62,000. That left \$10,000 to repair the building, exactly the amount of money we had raised. When God guides, he provides.

My last year at the church we fed 25,000 meals, clothed 18,000 people, and gave free medical help to 1,800 people in that center. In addition, we established a black church that averaged 125 in Sunday School. When God guides, he provides.

Don't miss this. God did not provide the sacrifice for Abraham while he stood at the base of the mountain. He didn't provide the sacrifice while he was climbing the mountain. He didn't provide the sacrifice while he was gathering wood. He didn't provide the sacrifice until Abraham laid his son on the altar.

If you want God to provide, you've got to climb the mountain. If you want God to provide, you've got to gather

the wood. If you want God to provide, you've got to strike the match. If you want God to provide, you lay something on the altar. Don't forget it — when God guides, he provides.

- If God abides with us, we should go where he leads.
- If God confides in us, we should listen when he speaks.
- If God provides for us, we should obey what he commands.

Don't be afraid, don't hesitate, trust the God of Abraham who is still walking and working with those who have the faith to follow.

Gladys Aylward, missionary to China more than 50 years ago, was forced to flee when the Japanese invaded Yangcheng. But she couldn't leave her work behind. With only one assistant, she led a hundred-plus orphans over the mountains toward Free China.

During Gladys's harrowing journey out of war-torn Yangcheng . . . she grappled with despair as never before. After passing a sleepless night, she faced the morning with no hope of reaching safety. A thirteen-year-old girl in the group reminded her of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

"But I am not Moses," Gladys cried in desperation.

"Of course you aren't," the girl said, "but Jehovah is still God!" (*The Hidden Price of Greatness*, by Besson and Hunsicker.) He is! So let's follow as he leads.

Chapter 9

Serving: The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Neighborhood Where You Live

Acts 10:38

Denton Lotz, executive director of the Baptist World Alliance, attended a meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow years ago where he met the Prime Minister of Russia. He was part of a delegation of religious leaders, most of them orthodox priests, and all dressed in their long black robes and black headpieces. When he stepped before the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister stepped back and said, “Where is your uniform?”

A companion beside him spoke up, “The uniform of Baptists is honesty, hard work, and service.”

Honesty! Hard work! Service! Every believer ought to clothe himself in those virtues. Jesus did. There is a verse of scripture that speaks to this. It comes from Peter’s first sermon to a Gentile congregation at the home of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion. Having declared that Jesus is Lord of Lords, he then sums up his earthly ministry with this simple phrase: “He went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). He then went on to declare his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

What did Peter mean by that? What did he mean by “doing good?” Look at Jesus’ life and you will know. He

fed the hungry, healed the sick, gave money to the poor (John 12:6, 13:29), befriended ethnics (Samaritans) and minorities and outcasts, cared for widows and orphans, and he shared God's love with all people.

He not only went about doing good, he taught us to do the same. In his most familiar teaching about doing good he said, "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me" (Matt. 25:35-36).

Then he added, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me" (vs. 40). With this he taught us that we serve God by doing these little things for little people (i.e., the least of these). Such acts of kindness he regards as being done personally to him and for which we would be rewarded. And he said that the man who has two coats should give one to the person who has none. And we are told to remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoner (Heb. 13:3). He said we can't even give a cup of cold water in his name without being rewarded for it (Matt. 10:42). And he said the Lord never forgets any labor of love which we do (Heb. 6:10).

Jesus didn't feed all the hungry, but he fed enough people to teach us that we should feed people also. He didn't heal all the sick, but he healed enough to teach us that we should care about the sick. In fact, the word "hospital" came from the Christian word "hospitality."

Early Christians took abandoned children, the sick, and needy into their homes and nursed them back to health. That's how hospitals came into being.

Ted Koppel said on Nightline several years ago, "The measure of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable —

the poor, the retarded, the children, the elderly.” This is not only the measure of a society, it is also the measure of our Christianity . . . and one of the ways we will be judged.

Denton Lotz tells of another occasion when children in one of the countries he was visiting sang a song about the judgment. The words were: “When we get to heaven the Lord will ask two questions, ‘Did you share your faith? Did you share your bread?’”

Real Christianity eventually comes down to that. This is not to suggest salvation by works. It does suggest that our works reveal the depth and quality of our faith. If we are true followers of the one who “went about doing good,” we must not be content just to go about. We must go about doing good also. We must share our faith and we must share our bread.

The great commandment, summarized by Jesus includes both love for God and love for people (Matt. 22:37-40). Quaker scholar, Rufus Jones, captured this dual dimension in his description of Christianity as “belief in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Philadelphia.”

If we are to win our state our lofty theological concepts must come down to earth and show themselves in practical service. As Jesus went about doing good, so must we. We must do good where we live. We are to go about doing good — as both servants of God and servants of man in our own communities.

There are three great truths about service taught us in scripture:

- It is the way of greatness.
- It is the way of happiness.
- It is the way of Christlikeness.

Beware of Ambition

First, service is the way to greatness. A casual reading of the gospels may give you the impression that the first followers of Jesus always acted from the noblest motives and the best of intentions. But not so. These were men with enormous egos, men who burned with ambition.

As Jesus traveled to Jerusalem for the last week of his earthly life he spoke with his disciples of his approaching death. They apparently thought that Jesus would establish an earthly kingdom and the mother of James and John wanted to be sure her sons had places of prominence in it. So she asked that one might sit on his right hand and the other on his left (Matt. 20:17-23).

The other disciples, hearing this, were resentful. They wanted those top places themselves. Jesus seized the moment and taught his disciples about true greatness. He told them that in the unbelieving world greatness is measured by power, authority, and rule. In that realm life is much like a pyramid. The man at the top is the most important and the more layers of people there are under you the more important you are. But Jesus was emphatic, "It shall not be so among you." Then he taught them that greatness in his kingdom was measured by service and ministry: "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matt. 20:26-28).

Obviously, it's possible for us to nurse unworthy ambitions while we are walking with Jesus. Worldly ambition expresses itself in three ways: the collection of wealth, the building of a reputation, and the wielding of power.

It may be possible that servanthood is the most neglected teaching of Jesus. There are far too many religious pyramid

climbers among us. Big time operators. Big shot preachers seeking appointments to high places. Politicking for positions, honors, and prestige. They love to be called doctor, chairman, president. We, like those early disciples, are often jockeying for positions and honors.

Shakespeare had Cardinal Woolsey say, “Beware of ambition, for by it the angels fell.”

Notice that Jesus does not condemn the quest for greatness. It is a normal desire. He, rather, redefines it. He gives them a new understanding of what true greatness is in the kingdom of God.

If we want to be really great in God’s eyes, we’ve got to climb down out of our ivory towers, mix and mingle in the sin and din of the world. We’ve got to move from the realm of the superficial to the realm of the sacrificial. We must take Jesus as our role model and do again what he did — give ourselves for hurting humanity. It is a way, the only way, to true greatness.

Maybe the underlying problem behind the scandals of modern Christianity is that we have distorted the kingdom of God by training our spotlight not on the servants, but on the stars. As Henri Nouwen said in his article, “Keep your eyes on the one who refused to turn stones into bread, jump from great heights, or rule with temporal power. Keep your eyes on the one who says, ‘Blessed are the poor, the gentle, those who mourn and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for the cause of unrighteousness’ . . . keep your eyes on the one who is poor with the poor, weak with the weak, and rejected with the rejected. That one is the source of all peace.” In other words, keep your eyes on the servant, not on the star. (*Christianity Today*, Nov. 8, 1988, pg. 80.)

Emerson said it best: “See how the great mass of men worry themselves into nameless graves while here and there a humble man forgets himself into immortality.”

A New Beatitude

Second, service is the way to happiness. On the way to Jerusalem Jesus had taught his disciples about true greatness. But apparently his teaching had made no lasting impression on them. For in just a few days he gathers with his disciples in the upper room for the last supper. You might think that supper would have ended in a mood of quietness and meditation. But, not so. The disciples were still bickering over greatness (Luke 22:24). Obviously they did not need another sermon. What they needed was an object lesson. So he arose from the table, wrapped a towel about his waist, poured a basin of water, and began washing his disciples’ feet.

Foot washing was a common practice in Jesus’ day. The shoes of that day were sandals. Roads were unpaved. So as they traveled, their feet got dusty. Homes had no chairs as we do. People rather reclined on the floor with their feet pulled up under them. If their feet were dirty, their garments would get soiled. So a servant met them at the door of a home and washed their feet. Foot washing was the work of servants and that’s the role Jesus was taking.

When Jesus finished he asked his disciples, “Do you realize what I have just done? You call me master and lord: and well you do; for so I am. If I then, your lord and master, have washed your feet; you ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:12-14).

Then he said, “I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you.” This is the only time in the Bible when Jesus ever said, “I have given you an

example.” Then he closes the experience with the beatitude, “If you know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17).

The Greek word translated “happy” is the word “makarios.” It is often translated “blessed.” And those sayings that begin with “blessed” are called “beatitudes” or the beautiful attitudes of life.

Jesus began his famous sermon on the mount with several of them. Jesus often used beatitudes as a teaching method.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake” (Matt. 5:3-11).

But, these were not the only beatitudes Jesus spoke. Paul gave us another when he said, “For you remember how the Lord Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). And, “Blessed is he that shall not be offended

in me” (Matt. 11:6). And here is yet another one: “If you know these things, happy (makarios) are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17).

He does not say we will be happy if we talk about it. He does not say we will be happy if we paint pictures of it. He does not say we will be happy if we embroider it and hang it on our wall. He says we will be happy if we do them.

Everyone who knows what life is about agrees, foot washing people — those who serve — are the really happy people in life. The late poet and critic, John Crowe Ransom, in his “I’ll Take My Stand” essay, said, “Men are not lovely, and men are not happy, for being too ambitious.”

I have personally never seen a time when there was more unhappiness in the ministry and in people’s lives than there is today. I think part of the reason is to be found right here. We live in such a self-indulgent and uncaring nation where we no longer reach out to help one another and then we miss the joy of life. It is in ministry, in humble service, that we find our deepest satisfaction as pastors and as lay people.

We need to recapture the spirit of R. C. Buckner, founder of Buckner Baptist Benevolences in Texas, who left a legacy of benevolence that has blessed thousands. Dr. J. M. Dawson wrote of him, “When Buckner was dying he said, ‘Please do not fold my hands across my breast. Leave them open, ready for work. I’ve had such joy and profit in service here, I trust the master will have something for me to do hereafter. Leave my hands open for service.’”

Courtney Tower tells of a young Canadian named Tony who worked in one of Mother Teresa’s hospitals in Calcutta, India. The people there are starving. Apart from cleaning up their wounds, about the only treatment is antibiotics and medicine for tuberculosis and pneumonia. Almost half the

patients die.

Tony decided to give his life to this work. He wrote his parents back home, "I've never been more alive than I am in this place full of death, never been so close to heaven as I am in this hell."

He goes on, looking about him: "You almost feel selfish because you benefit so much. You know, you can be told in school and in church, over and over, that there is a God, have faith, believe. Here you experience God in a tangible way, seeing him in other people." (Readers Digest Special Feature, Mother Teresa's Work of Grace, Nov. 1987, pg. 223.)

Albert Schweitzer, who had five earned doctors degrees and who distinguished himself in the fields of music and medicine and missions, returned from Africa to tell the graduating class of his alma mater, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve."

All some Christians want to talk about is being fed. William Henson said, "I think sometimes they've taken the cross off the altar and replaced it with a feed trough. I want to say to them sometimes, 'Don't you want to just take off the bib and put on the apron and wash some feet?'"

Foot washing is the way to happiness.

Oh God! Make Me Like Joe!

Third, humble service is the way of Christlikeness. The New Testament church was not all that different from churches today. It was a collection of imperfect people who had been saved and were in the process of becoming what God wanted them to be. So, we find many of the churches in scripture in conflict. The Galatian churches were

squabbling over doctrine. The church at Corinth was in conflict over preachers. The church at Philippi was divided over a disagreement between two women. It was a church in civil war.

This distressed the apostle Paul. He knew if we can't dwell together in love, how can we convince the world that we serve a God of love. And, if we're constantly in conflict, we dissipate our best energies on in-fighting and not on advancing the kingdom.

So he appeals for unity of heart and mind. He writes, "Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3).

Strife is knocking others down. Vain glory is lifting yourself up. That's a sure way to have conflict anywhere anytime.

The solution? The mind of Christ. Paul says, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). The word "mind" does not refer to the intellectual grasp of Christ. We could never have that. It rather means his spirit and attitude. What was his spirit? It was the humble spirit that caused him to step down from heaven as God to earth as a man. But, more than just becoming a man, he became a servant. He even died on the cross. When you see the condescending Christ stooping to serve and identifying with the lowest element of society, then you understand the spirit necessary for peace and harmony.

We must forget about our rights and think about others. It is as we do this that we become like the Savior.

Tony Campolo tells of a bowery mission drunk named Joe who was converted. He was transformed from a miserable wino into a caring person committed to helping others. Joe worked full-time at the mission. No matter

how dreaded or dirty the job, Joe was always willing to do it. He exemplified Christian living. One evening, when the director of the mission was preaching, a drunk came forward and knelt at the altar. He prayed out loud, “Oh God! Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe!” The director of the mission leaned over and said, “Son, I think it would be better if you prayed, ‘Make me like Jesus!’” The drunk looked at the mission director and asked, “Is he like Joe?” (Tony Campolo, *Everything You’ve Heard is Wrong*. Dallas: Word, 1992, pg. 73.)

Jesus was like Joe. But Joe was also like Jesus. And if we want to be like Jesus, we must be like Joe too. You must serve others. It is the way to Christlikeness.

Remember that Jesus washed the feet of Judas, who would betray him; and the feet of Peter, who would deny him; and the feet of the other disciples, who would desert him. He knew all of this in advance, but still, he washed their feet.

When you and I have a servant spirit, the spirit of Christ, no place is too small, no position is too low, no price is too high, no person is too insignificant for us to serve.

Chapter 10

Cooperating: The Army of the Anonymous

Colossians 4:7-18

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was one of the great Christian leaders of all times. Ordained at the age of twenty, he maintained an active ministry for the next 64 years, until he died at the age of 84. Wesley preached 42,400 sermons, an average of 15 per week, for 64 years. If a preacher today, preaching three times a week, Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, were to preach that many sermons, it would take him 320 years to do it.

Wesley traveled over 290,000 miles in his preaching-missionary journeys. This is equivalent to encircling the globe 12 times. And, he did it not by jet airplane, automobile, or rail, but on foot and on horseback and by boat.

He either wrote or edited more than 200 books.

This great Christian leader was converted one night, when, to get out of a thunderstorm, he slipped into Aldersgate Chapel and heard the testimony of a simple layman. Wesley said of that experience, “My heart was strangely warmed,” and he was never the same again.

Once, when Abraham Kaiper, the Dutch theologian, finished preaching, a plain peasant woman with a shawl over her head and shoulders said to him, “Dr. Kaiper, that was a great sermon, but you need to be born again.”

Not long thereafter he was. And, from that day forward he kept a picture of that plain woman on his desk to remind him of what she had done for him.

D. L. Moody, the famed evangelist, was to his generation what Billy Graham is to ours. But Moody, the great preacher, was won to Christ by the witness of his Sunday School teacher, a layman, who visited him at the shoe store where he worked in Boston. The man found Moody in the stock room, and shared Christ with him.

Moody's preaching ministry took him to England. There, one Sunday he heard a bivocational preacher, a butcher by profession, named Henry Varley, say, "The world has yet to see what God can do with one man whose life is completely committed to his will."

Moved by the words of the plain lay preacher, Moody resolved he would be that man.

Several years ago Donald W. McCullough, senior editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote an article about his father's retirement (Nov. 8, 1993, page 13). He said: "My father recently retired after 36 years as pastor of Bethany Community Church in Seattle. Most readers of this column will have never heard of him: He wrote no books or articles, he had no television ministry, he offered no seminars on effective church leadership, and he rarely spoke to other congregations. What John McCullough did was faithfully care for those entrusted to him."

Then, after describing the ordinary but effective ministry of his father, he wrote: "Evangelicals love their stars, lifting high on pedestals best-selling authors, conference speakers, television evangelists, and mega-church CEOs. But we would do well to remember that the church, for the most part, is nourished by unknown pastors who stay at it, day by day, in ordinary congregations of sinners who, by grace

and prodding, are slowly cajoled into sainthood.” These, he said his father referred to as “the army of the anonymous.”

One of the most impressive facts of both Bible and church history is that the kingdom of God has gone forward, not so much on the shoulders of its great leaders, as on the backs of ordinary people, plain vanilla saints, like you and me — the army of the anonymous.

This truth is vividly portrayed by the apostle Paul in his writings to the church at Colosse. The book of Colossians is one of his great theological treatises. In it, he carries us to spiritual heights as he gives us the most beautiful and comprehensive picture of Christ in the Bible. Then he brings us back to earth with a practical application of the gospel to the lives of believers.

As he concludes the book he speaks a brief personal word about ten of the people who were involved in the ministry with him and with the church. We know about the greatness of the apostle Paul. He honeycombed the Roman empire with churches. He wrote 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament. He championed the gospel against those who would pervert its simple message. But he did not work alone. These ten ordinary men also contributed to the work.

Take a minute to look at them: The first two Paul names are Tychicus (vs. 7) and (vs. 9) Onesimus. They were his envoys. They were to deliver this letter to the church, telling it how the apostle was doing, and then bring back word to him of the state of the church.

While Tychicus is mentioned four other times in scripture, we know little more of him than is recorded here. Onesimus, we know better. He was a runaway slave who went to Rome where he was converted under Paul’s preaching. Paul instructed him to return to his master, a risky venture, for according to Roman law a master could

put a runaway slave to death. But Philemon, Onesimus' master, was also one of Paul's converts. So Paul wrote him a letter (the book of Philemon) in which he made an appeal in behalf of Onesimus. He pointed out that Onesimus was now a changed man and that he should receive him back, not as a slave, but as a brother.

Next he names Aristarchus (vs. 10). When Paul was arrested in Ephesus because of his preaching, Aristarchus was arrested with him. Later, when Paul sailed for Rome as a prisoner, Aristarchus was with him again. Now, in Rome, he is called a fellow prisoner.

Obviously Aristarchus was the kind of man you could count on in a pinch, the kind who would stick by you in tough times. He was willing to lay his life on the line for Christ and his friend if necessary.

Then he names Mark, the nephew of Barnabas (vs. 10). John Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. But, along the way Mark quit the work and returned home. Paul took this defection hard and refused to take Mark on his second missionary journey. This led to a dispute and an eventual split with Barnabas as his missionary partner. By now Mark had redeemed himself and proven to be a valuable assistant to the apostle Paul in God's work (2 Tim. 4:11).

Then he names Jesus, who was also called Justus. This was a common name in the New Testament world, but it is the only mention of Justus in scripture.

Next he names Epaphras (vs. 12). All that is said of him is "he labors fervently for you in prayers that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."

Then he mentions Luke (vs. 14), the beloved physician, and Demas (vs. 14), who later became a deserter (2 Tim. 4:10).

Next comes Nymphas (vs. 15), in whose home the church met. Church buildings as we know them did not come into existence until 250 A.D. Before that time the church met in rented halls, on river banks, and in people's homes. Nymphas' home was one of them.

And finally, he speaks of Archippus (vs. 17). The church, Paul said, was to say to him, "Take heed to the ministry which thou has received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it."

While some of these men are repeatedly mentioned in the scriptures, most appear only this once. They made their entrance on the stage of history and then exit just as quickly, never to be heard from again. They play a part in the drama of world evangelization, but always as part of the supporting cast, never as the lead actors. That part went to the apostle Paul. But the very listing of their names here and the ever so brief comments about some of them, helps us understand how important such people are in God's service.

If we would win our state we must have more people like them — people who cooperate in God's work, willing to play second fiddle, willing to serve in the army of the anonymous. We can't all preach to the masses like Billy Graham; we can't all write best sellers like Chuck Swindoll; and we can't all be great soloists like George Beverly Shea. But we can go quietly about God's work, content to serve in obscurity. We can be a part of the vast army of the anonymous, so necessary for winning our world to Christ.

Three truths about this needed army emerge from this listing that we must not miss:

- God needs all of us.
- We all need one another.
- We all need God.

Do What You Can

First, God needs all of us. While the apostle Paul played the key role in world evangelization and the establishment of the New Testament church, he was, by no means, the only player in the cast. These men were, by his own words, “faithful ministers,” his “fellow servants,” his “beloved brothers,” and his “fellow workers” in the kingdom of God. Paul, perhaps more than anyone else, realized how dependent the work of the Lord is on such people.

We don’t know what all of them did, but Paul does mention the work of two of them specifically: Epaphras, who labored fervently for the church in prayer that it might stand perfect and complete in all the will of God (vs. 12), and Nymphas, who allowed the church to meet in his house (vs. 15).

It is possible that these men did not possess the intellect or the charisma of the great apostles, but they could pray for the church and they could open their home to the church. And the church needed both. The church needs preachers and missionaries. But it also needs prayer and a place to meet. We need to remember that the man who kneels in the prayer closet to pray is just as important as the man who stands in the pulpit to preach. And the person who opens his home to a Bible study is just as vital as the person who opens his Bible to teach that study.

What can you do? What is your gift? What is your ministry? Can you pray? Preach? Provide a place to worship? Whatever it is, we must do it if we are to win our state.

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Second, we all need one another. Sometimes the apostle Paul, in his writings, leaves the impression that he was terribly self-sufficient, i.e., that he and God could make it without anybody else. He wrote once, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). That sounds awfully independent. He also wrote, “I have learned that in whatsoever state I am in, therewith to be content. I have learned both how to be abased and I know how to abound” (Phil. 4:11-12).

Those statements appear to be from a man who needs nothing and no one. But then we read passages like this and we know better. These men, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus, Paul says, “have been a comfort unto me.”

The word “comfort” is the Greek word from which we get our word *paregoric*. Do you remember when your babies had the colic? You would rock them, pat them, sing to them, but nothing helped. There was no way you could get them to relax and go to sleep. Nothing worked. Then when both you and the baby were exhausted, you gave them some *paregoric*. The baby relaxed and both of you got some rest.

Paul said that these brethren were like a *paregoric* to him. They were like a tonic to his soul. They warmed his heart. The fact is, everybody needs around him a group of people, Christian brothers, to strengthen, to help him through life. We all need spiritual *paregoric*.

Not only did Paul need comfort, but Archippus, amember or a minister of the Colossian church, needed confronting. He needed to be called into accountability. Paul wrote to the church, “And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord that thou fulfill it.”

We don't know if Archippus was a minister or just a member of the Colossian congregation. We don't know what his ministry was. We don't know if his problem was what he had done or what he had left undone. We just know he wasn't fulfilling the ministry the Lord had given him and the church was to confront him about it. They were to call him into account.

We all need that.

John Donne, the popular preacher and writer from England, wrote the words that Ernest Hemingway used for the title of his first novel, "For Whom the Bell Tolls." He wrote, "No man is an island entire in himself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea then Europe is the lesser. Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee."

Do you see the picture? We may not have all come over on the same ship, but we are all in the same boat. We are in this together. We are all tied to one another. Not only does God need all of us, we all need one another.

Girded by Grace

Finally, we all need God. Paul closes his letter with the words, "Grace be with you" (vs. 18). The word "grace" refers to "the favor" or "the blessings" of God. That one single word, "grace," captures the essence of the gospel.

We are saved by that grace (Eph. 2:8-9). We do not work for or earn our salvation. It is a gift from God. It is

the result of his favor, his love for us.

And we are also sustained by grace. Paul spoke of having a “thorn in the flesh.” This was some kind of physical infirmity that limited him in his work for God. He prayed three times for the Lord to take it away, but he didn’t. He rather said, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Where do we find grace? Where is it dispensed? Where is the getting place? The book of Hebrews tells us to “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

So there is a throne of grace available to us. And we approach that throne through Jesus, our high priest. We dare not forget, therefore, that while we work for him, the work depends on him. We need God’s favor, his blessings.

A young preacher, discouraged and defeated, came to an older minister for counsel. He said, “Pastor, I have no abilities and no talents. I have failed miserably. God can’t possibly use me.” The wise pastor said, “Yes, he can. God is a potter. He works with mud.”

If you believe nothing significant can happen through your life, you have said more about your belief in God than you have about yourself. God can and will use you. He needs all of us.

Paul’s army of the anonymous did what they could for the Lord and that’s what we all must do if we are to win our state.