

PAUL W. POWELL

SPECIAL SERMONS

FOR SPECIAL DAYS



Special Sermons for Special Days

Paul W. Powell



ANNUITY BOARD OF THE
SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

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75 Years Of Keeping Your Confidence

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Introduction

Regardless of one's method of sermon planning and sermon preparation, there are certain days and events that almost dictate a theme. From New Year to Christmas there are a number of these "special days" that recur each year. Other special days, such as closure of one's pastorate or the ordination of a minister, or starting a building finance campaign, come less frequently.

In thirty-four years as a pastor I tried to make special days meaningful for both my people and me. Sometimes the ideas came easily. Other times the sermon developed after agonizing hours or days of study and prayer.

This little book is given in the hope you will find a key thought or a complete sermon that will be useful in your call as a minister.

My prayer is that all your days will be special in the assurance "This is the day which the Lord hath made" (Psalm 118:24). Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Paul W. Powell
Dallas, February 5, 1993

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New Year: Make This the Best Year of Your Life

Matt. 11:28-30

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "What a sorry world it would be if it were always winter but never Christmas!" The chill of December has certainly been alleviated by the warmth of the holidays.

Here is a corollary: What a sad life it would be if it were always the old year and never the new! Time, of course, does not know the divisions we give it. It is man who rings bells, blows horns, and throws confetti to usher in the new year. We do this because we, of all God's creatures alone, have an awareness of time. And, we long for times of new beginnings.

Louise Fletcher Tarkington expressed the longings of many when she wrote:

*"I wish there were some wonderful place
Called the land of Beginning Again
Where all our mistakes, and all our heartaches,
And all our selfish griefs
Could be cast like a shabby old coat at the door
And never be put on again."*

In a short time the new year will be on our hands. Relentlessly, the pages of the calendar fall away so that the future is suddenly now. No thoughtful person can approach such a time without some introspection. We are bound to ask, "What will it mean to me?" "What can I do with it?" These are thoughts which come naturally with each year end.

While we cannot know what the future holds, we do know this, it will largely be what you and I and God make of it.

It is appropriate, therefore, that in these last days of the old year that we plan for the first days and the three hundred and sixty-five (or six) successive days of the new year.

A long time ago Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed what ought to be the desire of every one of us, "Write it on your heart that every day is the best day of the year." Despite the failures and mistakes of the past we can make it so.

What can we do to make every day the best day for us? Here are some suggestions. If you follow them they can not only make every day the best day of the year, they can also make this new year the best year of your life.

Life is Not a Dress Rehearsal

First, we should live one day at a time. Stan Ghetz, the outstanding jazz saxophonist, had a life-threatening bout with cancer. In a radio interview several years later he was asked, "What did you learn from this illness?" He replied, "I learned that life is not a dress rehearsal."

Marcus Aurelius, the great Roman emperor/philosopher wrote, "To live each day as though it was one's last, never flustered, never apathetic, never attitudinizing — here is the perfection of character."

There is no second chance at life. The only moment any of us ever has is the present moment. Time can't be saved, only savored.

The psalmist must have had this in mind when he resolved, "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps. 118:24).

Some people live their lives in the past, weighted down over the mistakes and failures of yesterday. Others live on an expectancy basis, always looking for something in the future. A boy in high school anticipates college; in college, he anticipates the joy that will be his when he gets an engineering job; when he gets an engineering job, he believes the joy will come

when he marries Mary and has a home; and so he goes on . . . anticipating.

Living one day at a time means keeping yourself responsive to simple things. For most of life, few wonderful things happen. For most of us, there are not big moments — only a pile of small ones. Most of us miss life's big prizes: The Pulitzer. The Nobel. Oscars. Tonys. Emmys. But we're all eligible for life's small pleasures. A pat on the back. A kiss behind the ear. A four-pound bass. A full moon. An empty parking space. A crackling fire. A great meal. A glorious sunset.

Art Rooney reminded us that if we don't enjoy getting up and working and finishing our work and sitting down to a meal with family or friends, then chances are we're not going to be very happy. If our happiness or unhappiness is based on some major event like a great new job, huge amounts of money, a flawless happy marriage or a trip to Paris, we will not be happy much of the time.

If, on the other hand, happiness depends on a good breakfast, flowers in the yard, a brisk walk or a nap, then we are more likely to live with quite a bit of happiness.

So we must not fret about coping life's grand awards. We have to enjoy its tiny delights. They are always near at hand and there are plenty for all of us.

The motto of our life, therefore, ought to be: "Learn from yesterday, hope for tomorrow, but live today." If you will do that, this will likely be the best year of your life.

Train for the Final Event

Second, we should live our life with a view to the end. Ted Koppel interviewed Mikel Gorbechev the day before he stepped down as president of the Soviet Union. He asked President Gorbechev if there were some story, some Russian fable, that summed up his feelings. Gorbechev said that there was, and then told the story of a young prince who came to power in Russia. He wanted to rule the country well and so he asked the wise men of his country to share their wisdom with him so he

could rule his people wisely.

Ten years later they sent to him ten wagons loaded with books. He asked, "When can I read all of these? I must govern the people."

He asked if they could distill their wisdom for him. Ten more years passed and they sent him ten volumes. This was still too much for him to read, and he asked that their wisdom be reduced even more.

Five more years passed and they brought him one volume. But, by this time, he was an old man and on his deathbed. He asked the wise men if they could sum up their message in one sentence. They replied, "People are born. People suffer. People die."

That is not the sum of all wisdom but life's ultimate statistic is the same for all of us, one out of one dies. And if we are wise we will live it with the end in view.

We would all do well to pause and think how we would like to be remembered when that time comes. And then begin working our way backward by beginning to do those things — loving, serving, giving — that would most likely cause it to happen.

Robert T. Morris said, "I hate funerals and would not attend my own if it could be avoided, but it is well for every man to stop once in a while to think of what sort of a collection of mourners he is training for his final event." To do that will help you make this the best year of your life.

Let Happiness Sneak Up on You

Third, we should give ourselves to others. Jesus, toward the end of his ministry, met with his disciples in the upper room. He wrapped a towel around his waist, took a basin of water, and moved among the disciples washing their feet. In so doing, he was assuming the role of a common servant.

When he had finished, he sat down and asked the disciples if they understood what he had done. He, the Lord of glory, had

become a servant. Then he said, "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15).

This is the only place in scripture where Jesus ever said he had given us an example. Then he concluded by saying, "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John 13:17).

Jesus knew that happiness is a butterfly — the more you chase it, the more it flies away from you and hides. But, if you stoop and serve, it will light on you. The happiest people I know are the ones who work at being kind, thoughtful, helpful, and generous. And when they do, happiness sneaks into their lives.

Albert Schweitzer spoke to a graduating class in an English boy's school back in 1935. He said, "I do not know what your destiny will be. Some of you will perhaps occupy remarkable positions. Perhaps some of you will become famous by your pens, or as artists. But I know one thing: the only ones who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Helen Keller said, "I find life an exciting business — and most exciting when it is lived for others." And actor Danny Glover said, "We make a living by what we do. We make a life by what we give."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it beautifully when she wrote:

"A child's kiss set on by sighing lips shall make thee
Glad;
A poor man served by thee shall make thee
Rich;
A sick man helped by thee shall make thee
Strong;
Thou shall be served thyself by every sense
Of service which thou renderest."

We are best to ourselves when we are good to others. It's one of the things we can do to make this the best year of our life.

Don't Hug a Grudge

Fourth, we should learn to forgive and forget. A person is what he remembers, but he is also what he forgets. One of the healthiest things a human being can do is become a master of forgetting. It's good to have a good memory, but it's also good to have a good forgetter.

The apostle Paul gave us a part of the secret of his great life when he said, "Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

We can't be sure of all the things Paul had in mind when he spoke of "forgetting those things which are behind," but I'm sure he must have included his failures and disappointments, the hurts he had suffered, as well as his successes and achievements. To live a victorious life you can't rest on yesterday's laurels and you can't harbor yesterday's hurts. As someone has said, "The rewards in life go to those who are willing to give up the past."

Charles Brinkley, a banker friend from Fort Worth, told me his wise old father once said to him, "Son, there ain't no burden so heavy as carrying a grudge."

Bernard Baruch, advisor to six presidents, said, "One of the secrets of a long and fruitful life is to forgive everybody everything before you go to bed at night."

In the movie, *The Revengers*, a rancher is searching for a gang that killed his family and destroyed his home. In a moving scene a woman who had befriended him said, "You must be careful what you put in your heart. If you fill it with hate, there'll be no room for love and laughter and tears. And your heart will rot."

Anger and bitterness are poisons just like strychnine. They can build up slowly in you until they kill you. So, whatever you do, don't hug a grudge. Don't lug into the new year your resentments, your hates, your frustrations, your disappointments, your regrets. There is too much impediment in that.

They will wear you down. The thing to do at the end of the old year is to drop the past—forget it—skip it—throw it into the past—and look to the future.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says:

There can be no joy like peace
There can be no gift like health
There can be no faith like trust
There can be no sickness like hate.

If you want to make this year the best year of your life, forgive and forget. It's the only way to live happily.

Life Sees You Coming

Fifth, we should face adversity with courage. Most of us get at least one knock down punch in life—a death, a divorce, a disease, a wayward child, an alcoholic relative. As novelist Alan Patton, in a poem to his son, wrote, “Life sees you coming. She lies in wait for you; she cannot but hurt you.”

Adversity is never pleasant, but it can be good for us. If responded to correctly it can bring out the finest qualities in our life. Christian graces are like perfumes, the more they are pressed, the sweeter they smell; like stars that shine brightest in the dark; like trees, which, the more they are shaken, the deeper root they take, and the more fruit they bear. That's a part of why Paul said “we glory in tribulation” (Rom. 5:3).

Like Job, I don't understand all of God's ways, but even the Lord learned obedience through the things he suffered. I would not, therefore, ask to go through a world without adversity, for it is sorrow and suffering which increases our sensitivity toward God and others. And, if we could somehow keep pain from our children's door, it would be life itself that we would be keeping out.

Adversity is a part of life. There is no way to escape it, no way around it. You must go through it. But, by God's grace we can do that and not be defeated by it. And that's what we must do

to make this the best year of our life.

Happiness is a Choice

Sixth, we should keep a sense of humor. When Georges Pompidou became president of France in 1969 he created a new cabinet post. He called it "Secretary of State Charged with Public Opinion." It was the responsibility of this person to keep his ear to the ground and report to the president any cause of discontent. The man who was appointed described his responsibility, "I am," he said, "the minister of moans and groans."

We don't have to go through life moaning and groaning. We can look on the bright side of life. We can be positive and optimistic. We can acknowledge the clouds of life and also see the silver linings.

When my wife and I were planning to move from Tyler where I had pastored for seventeen years, to Dallas to head the Annuity Board, friends asked, "How are you going to like Dallas?" I replied, "We will do just fine. We are happy people. We are happy wherever we are."

Happiness is always a choice. Abraham Lincoln was right, "Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be."

We especially need to learn to laugh at ourselves. Once when Lincoln was engaged in a debate with Frederick Douglas, Douglas accused him of being two-faced. Lincoln, who was far from handsome made a classic reply, "I will let the audience decide for itself. If I had another face, do you think I would be wearing this one?"

The Bible says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (Prov. 15:13). So cultivate a happy, cheerful disposition. It is essential to making this the best year of your life.

Put Your Life in the Hand of God

Seventh, we should put our life in the hand of God. We cannot know what the future holds. We cannot see five years

or five weeks or five minutes into the future. Therefore, we make a mistake if we presume on tomorrow. The scriptures remind us that our life is like a vapor and no man knows what one day may bring forth. So, we ought to live it in conscious dependence upon God and surrender to His will (James 4:13-15).

In his 1939 Christmas message to the nation, King George VI of England expressed the faith we all need when he quoted the words of Lewis Haskins:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, "Give me a light, that I might tread safely into the unknown." And he replied, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand in the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

In what may be the greatest invitation of the Bible, the Lord invites us to do just that, to put our hand in his. He said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28).

Life was never intended to be borne in a single yoke. The Lord invites us to yield our lives to him and let him share and bear life's load with us.

The poet John Richard Moreland put it best:

*The hands of Christ
Seemed very frail.
For they were broken
By a nail.
But only they
Reach heaven at last
Whom those frail, broken
Hands hold fast.*

Take your hand of faith and put it in his hand of grace and it will be the best year of your life.

And as you do, remember this:

You can spend your life
Any way you like.
But you can only spend it once!

2

Easter: It's Not Over Until It's Over

Luke 24:13-50

In the 1982 NBA championship series between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Philadelphia 76ers, the Lakers jumped out to a commanding 3-0 lead. They needed to win only one more victory to clinch the crown. But the 76ers refused to give up. In the interview with a sports writer Dr. J (Julius Ervin) was asked if his team was willing to concede the series. He expressed the optimism of his whole ball club when he said, "It's not over until it's over."

What he meant was, "There's at least one more game to play, so we've still got a chance. We're not ready to give up. We're not throwing in the towel. We will play it out until the end, until we lose the final game."

The saying of Dr. J caught on and now people everywhere say, concerning events where defeat looks eminent but there is still a glimmer of hope, "It's not over until it's over."

That, I believe, is the message of Easter. God can bring life out of death, victory out of defeat, resurrection out of crucifixion. So, don't close the books on a life too soon. Don't throw in the towel prematurely. Don't walk away from a problem before you ought to. If God is in it, it's not over until it's over.

From his birth Jesus was on a collision course with death. When the announcement of his birth came to Herod, the king, he ordered all male babies two years of age and under put to death to make sure he killed the newborn king.

From the outset of his earthly ministry Jesus was confronted

with opposition, rejection, and scorn. The leaders of Israel soon determined he must die. There was no other way to silence him.

The shadow of the cross seemed always to hang over him. He said to his disciples, "The son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and give his life a ransom for many." He announced to them, on more than one occasion, that he must go to Jerusalem where he would be betrayed, crucified, and then raised again. As he neared Jerusalem, in the closing days of his life, he said, "And I, if I be lifted up (speaking of his approaching death on the cross) will draw all men unto me." The cross never took him by surprise. It was always before him.

Then the day that shall live in infamy came. It was the darkest hour in human history. Jesus, the son of God, was betrayed by Judas, one of his closest friends. He went through the mockery of a trial under the guidance of the most respected religious leader in Israel. He was sentenced to death by the puppet procurator Pontius Pilate.

He was nailed to the old rugged cross like a common criminal. And, finally, he was laid to rest in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

If you had interviewed people on the streets of Jerusalem at sunset on Good Friday and asked, "Is it over?" they would have replied with one accord, "Yes, it's over. It's all over."

Ask Judas, who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, "Judas, is it over?" And he would answer, "Yes, it's over. I wish it weren't. I have betrayed innocent blood. I wish I had a chance to rectify my mistakes. But now it's over, all over."

Ask Caiphus, the high priest of Israel, "Caiphus, is it over?" "Yes," he would reply, "thank God, it's finally over. At last we're through with the troublemaker. It had to come to this, you know. I'm glad we're rid of him."

Ask Pilate, the vacillating puppet of Rome who sentenced Jesus to death knowing full well he was innocent of any crime, "Pilate, is it all over?" "Yes," Pilate would respond, "it's over. While he was not guilty of any crime, at least this will satisfy the people and we can have peace once again. Yes, it's over."

It's finally, all over."

Ask the Roman soldier who presided over the crucifixion, "Captain, is it over?" And he would answer, "Yes, it's over. I have presided over hundreds of these executions. It's a nasty business. And this one was worse than most. We pierced his side to be certain of his death, but I'm 100 percent sure. Yes, it's over, it's all over."

Ask his followers, "Is it over?" Well, let them answer for themselves. On the road to Emmaus one of them responded, "We trusted that he was the one to save Israel" (Luke 24:21). Notice their hope was in the past tense. They were no longer looking to Jesus as the savior, the Messiah. They once did, but no longer are. The reason? They are sure it's over, all over.

But, we know it wasn't. The disciples took Jesus' lifeless body down from the cross, buried it in Joseph's tomb, and rolled the stone securely over the entrance. Early Easter morning some of the women made their way back to the tomb to finish the burial process. And, to their dismay and delight they found it empty. The angel greeted them with the best news of time and eternity, "He is not here. The Lord is risen."

Then they knew firsthand the central truth of Easter: it's not over until it's over. Nothing is over until God gets through with it. He specializes in turning tragedy into triumph, and turning Calvaries into Easter mornings.

Because of Easter, there are at least three things we ought never to do.

From the Uttermost to the Guttermost

First, because of the resurrection we should never give up on any person. In an old poem entitled, "The Widow in the Bye Street," John Masefield depicts a scene of dramatic agony. A young man is about to be executed for crimes against the state, and in the crowd that gathered to witness his death stands his widowed mother who is about to be left all alone in the world. When the trap door opens and the rope has finished its work, this pathetic soul crumpled to the ground and began to sob

uncontrollably. Those nearby heard her say something about, "Broken things, too broke to mend."

That's the way many people feel about their own life or the life of someone they know.

They feel shackled by their sins and their circumstances. They feel enslaved and entrapped. They are so deeply in debt; their marriages are so messed up; their children are so rebellious; they are so enslaved to drugs or alcohol that they feel their lives are "too broke to mend."

But no person is beyond redemption. It matters not how deep into sin you may have fallen, how far away from God you may have wandered, how many scars may be on your soul, it's not too late for you or your loved one. Remember the message of Easter: "it's not over until it's over."

In the New Testament world, who is the person least likely to have been saved? Was it not the apostle Paul? He called himself "a Hebrew of Hebrews." He was born of the tribe of Benjamin. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He was a strict Pharisee.

He had such a fanatical zeal for Israel and against Christians that he said, "I made havoc of the church of God." The word "havoc" describes a wild boar rooting indiscriminately in a vineyard, tearing up everything he could get to. That was Paul's attitude toward the church.

While on the road to Damascus to arrest and imprison Christians, he met the living Christ and was converted. After he became a Christian he became the greatest church planter in history. He sought to spread the gospel with the same zeal he had previously sought to destroy it.

If the apostle Paul could be saved, anyone can be saved. His life is proof positive that no one has to stay the way he is. A seminary professor used to remind his students, "Young men, when you preach, never leave Jesus on the cross or the prodigal son in the far country." God can bring his son down from the cross. And he can bring the prodigal back from the far country.

The Lord can save from the uttermost to the guttermost. Jesus was crucified between two thieves. In those last dying

moments, one mocked him, and one turned to him in repentance. One was lost so that none might presume. The other was saved that none might despair.

God Is So Good

Second, because of the resurrection, we should never write off any experience as a total waste. If God can raise the dead, he can bring good out of the bad that comes to us.

You ordinarily don't expect much philosophy from Monday Night Football, but several years ago Don Meredith said, in one of his commentaries, "If you sail the seas long enough you are eventually going to run into rough waters."

Storms are a part of life. They come to all of us. And, being a Christian does not alter that fact. The Bible knows of nothing of the new strand of Christianity called, "Health and Wealth" theology. Jesus never taught it. He said, "In this world, you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

The apostle Paul never taught it. He wrote, "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). Peter never taught it. He said, "Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on his behalf" (1 Pet. 4:16). And James never taught it. He wrote, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into different kinds of trials" (James 1:2).

The fact is, in the Bible and throughout history some of God's best people have endured constant pain and intense suffering. What the Lord promises his people is not exemption, but redemption. He does not promise to get us out of trouble, he promises to get us through it. He does not isolate us from life's trials, but insulates us in them.

The apostle Paul lays the foundation of our faith and hope in the midst of the storms when he wrote, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

The word "know" means to have absolute and settled

knowledge. There are some things we can be sure about. One of them is that God works in and through all things for our ultimate good, that we may be made into the likeness of his son, Jesus Christ. We don't just think so. We don't just hope so. We don't just pray so. We know so.

There are three basic truths that flow from this verse.

The first is, God is at work in our world today. Some people have a hard time believing this. The deist believes that God created the world but that he has no personal involvement in it now. He believes God created the heavens and the earth, wound them up like an eight-day clock, then walked away to leave them to run on their own. He does not believe that God is active in the affairs of men today. But the whole message of the Bible is that God is personally concerned about each one of us and that he has acted and still acts on our behalf.

Some people have trouble believing God is at work in our world today because they cannot see his hand or feel his presence. And what they can't perceive, they won't believe. But, seeing and feeling are not the test of reality. For example, at this very moment the earth is spinning on its axis at 1,000 miles per hour. Go outside and look around. Do you see things swirling? No!

At the same time, the earth is rotating around the sun at 66,000 miles an hour. Do you feel dizzy? No!

You see, it's possible to have movement without perception. Just so, it is possible for God to be at work in our world and in our lives though we cannot see him and we cannot feel him.

Second, God works for good. Trouble is not the handiwork of God. He is not the author of tragedy and heartache. Whatever God touches, he touches for good. If he comes into your life, it will be better for it. If he touches a marriage or a home, he enriches it. If he is a part of a business, he will improve it. Whatever God does to us and for us ultimately is for good.

Why then is there evil and suffering and death in the world? Where do they come from, if not from God? The simplest explanation for the existence of suffering and death is sin and Satan. We live in a fallen world. When Adam sinned, all of

creation came under the curse. As long as we live in a sin-cursed world we will be touched by these things. Moreover, we ourselves are sinners. We are a part of man's fall. If God is to blame at all, it is only in that he made us free. He gave us the freedom of choice and that choice did and still does involve consequences.

Third, God works for us. He not only works for good, he works for *our* good. The verse says, all things work together for good "to them who love God" and are "the called" according to his purpose. Do you love God? Then he works all things for your good. Have you heard and answered his call to repentance and faith and discipleship? Then he works all things for your good.

You may say, "I can understand how God works in the life of Billy Graham. He is a great evangelist." Or, "I can understand how God works in the lives of missionaries. They sacrifice their all for him." "But," you say, "it's hard to believe God works in my life for my good in the same way. I'm insignificant. I'm a nobody."

Yet, that is precisely the promise of this verse. Look at it again — carefully. What it does not say is as important as what it does say:

- It does not say God causes everything that happens
— He doesn't!
- It does not say that everything that happens is good
— it isn't!
- It does not say everything is going to work out good
for everybody
— it won't!

What the verse says is that God works in and through all things for our ultimate well-being, i.e., that we might be made in the likeness and image of Jesus Christ.

Don't forget the message of Easter, even in the darkest night, "It's not over until it's over." God can take man's worst and turn it into his best. He turned Calvary into Easter. He can bring

resurrection out of crucifixion. He did it once and he can do it again.

Abundant Life Now — Eternal Life Then

Third, because of the resurrection we should never despair in the face of death. Death is a fact of life. The moment we are born we are old enough to die. Life's ultimate statistic is the same for all people, one out of one dies.

We need to recognize and be ready for the ultimate. The scriptures say, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). The psalmist prayed, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

But, while death is certain, we need not be afraid of it. Because of our Lord's resurrection we can face it with calm assurance. The scriptures declare that Jesus abolished (i.e., rendered powerless) death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Tim. 1:10).

Jesus has transformed death from a conclusion to an introduction; from an ending to a beginning; from a period to a comma. And because he died, we can experience abundant life now and eternal life then.

We can take the posture of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:55. He is an old man growing older all the time. He stands before an open grave, looking into the raw red throat of death. Then in one of the most dramatic moments, not only in the New Testament but in all of literature, Paul defies and mocks death by saying, "Ha! Death where is your sting? Ha! Grave, where is your victory?" Then he adds, "But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Years ago Dr. Ray Summers, former teacher of New Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and later head of the Graduate Program and Department of Religion at Baylor University, was on a sabbatical at the University of Basel in Switzerland, when one of the great old professors died. The professor was a colleague of Karl Barth, the well-known

theologian. At his funeral service, as is the custom in Switzerland, friends walked by the grave of the deceased and threw an edelweiss, those beautiful and delicate yellow flowers with soft, white leaves that grow high in the Alps, into the open grave. They filed by one by one, and then came Karl Barth.

He stopped for a moment and looked into the grave of his friend, until his face turned red with anger. Then, instead of tossing the edelweiss into the grave, he drew back his arm and hurled it into the mouth of the grave with a mighty thrust. It was an act of anger, of defiance, of mockery toward death. It was as if he was saying, "Death, I hate you. Death, you may win today but ultimately you will lose. You will one day yield up your victim in resurrection."

Everyone knows, as David Redding said, death did something terrible to Christ. But not everyone knows that he did something wonderful to death. He didn't just endure death; he conquered it. The punch line of the New Testament therefore is not a tragic cry, "Help!" but a triumphant shout, "Hallelujah!"

No matter how final death may look, remember the message of Easter: It's not over until it's over. God raised Jesus from the dead and one day he will raise us up also. Now, because of his resurrection we can live until we die and then we can live forever.

It is the way of God to bring life out of death, victory out of defeat, success out of failure, triumph out of tragedy. He has a way of turning Good Fridays into Easter mornings. That's why we ought not to give up on anybody, we ought not to write off any experience a total waste, and we ought not to despair in the face of death.

3

Mother's Day: She Was the Sunshine of Our Home

Titus 2:1-5

Several years ago I was preaching a revival meeting at Pine Springs, a small rural community north of Tyler, Texas. I arrived early for the Monday evening service, so I decided to stroll through the old country cemetery adjacent to the church and read the epitaphs on the tombstones.

I saw one I shall never forget. It read: "Mahalia, the wife of R. Adkins, she was the sunshine of our home."

I thought, "Isn't that the way every wife and mother would like to be remembered? Doesn't the Lord God want every wife and mother to be the sunshine of her home?"

That's my challenge to you mothers this Mother's Day. Billy Graham's mother once said she did not believe Christian women wanted Mother's Day to be a day of self-congratulations — rather a day of soul searching, that they might gain a new awareness of the vital role God has given them in the home, in the lives of their children, and in the life of the nation as a whole.

It is out of that conviction that I challenge you today to be the sunshine of your home. That doesn't mean that the world must always revolve around you. It doesn't mean that you must always be bright and smiling. But, it does mean, I believe, that you provide the warmth and light every home needs.

But, how does a mother do that? What is involved in being the sunshine of your home?

The apostle Paul tells us, I believe, in Titus 2:1-5 what the

role of God's woman is in today's world. In this passage of scripture he sets out those qualities necessary for a mother to be all the Lord expects her to be.

The background to this teaching will help us understand it better. The apostle Paul had sent Titus, to whom this book was written, to Crete on a special assignment. Crete had a reputation for being a hard place. One of their own prophets had said Cretans were "liars, wicked brutes, and lazy gluttons" (1:12). And, some of that spirit had spilled over into the church. Titus' task was two-fold, to "set in order" things that were lacking and to "ordain elders" in every church. The phrase "set in order" is a medical term that means "to set in joint." It describes what a doctor does when you go to him with a broken bone. Because the parts of the bone are not in right relationship with one another, the doctor sets them back into place, so the limb can heal properly, and be useful once again. Situations were not right in the church in Crete, and Titus had been sent there as a spiritual orthopedist to correct them.

A part of what Paul instructed Titus to do was to give counsel concerning the Christian home. In the verses of our text he names every person who would normally be a part of a first-century household. And, he sets out specific responsibilities each has as a part of the family. He talks about older men (v. 2); older women (v. 4); young women (v. 4); young men (v. 6); and slaves (v. 9).

In wealthier first-century households there ordinarily would have been slaves who were considered as much a part of the family as any other member. So, Paul outlines their responsibilities, for they, too, had a part in making the home what it ought to be.

Many scholars believe Titus had written Paul asking to be transferred to a new field. Perhaps he had grown weary in well-doing. Perhaps he felt the Cretans were hopelessly wicked. Perhaps he felt his wife would be happier in Rome or in Athens. But, for whatever reason, Titus wanted to move.

Paul seemed to be saying to Titus, "I know Crete is a tough place, but that's why I left you there. Crete will not be right until

the church is right. And the church will not be right until the home is right.”

When you consider the amount of time and space Paul devotes to the responsibility of the woman, it seems clear he strongly believed the mother was the most important person in making the home what it ought to be.

What are the characteristics necessary to being the sunshine of your home? What must a mother do to fulfill her Christian responsibility? Paul lists four things here.

The High Priest of the Home

First, a mother should go about her duties in a priestly manner. Paul begins with attitudes. That's the reasonable place to begin because, as a sign in my son's office reads, “Attitude is everything.” It determines our actions, our outlook, and our responses.

Paul's advice was, behave, conduct yourself as it “becometh holiness.” The word “holy” literally means “set apart” or “sacred.” Paul was saying that a Christian mother and wife should go about her duties in the home in a priestly manner. She should think of her home as a temple of God and see the service she renders is sacred.

Someone has said that consecration is that which makes drudgery divine. That was never more true than with a woman's work in the home. The drudgery of washing dishes and clothes, mopping floors, and dusting furniture can suddenly be transformed into something sacred if a mother views her responsibilities as priestly service.

The kitchen of every Christian home ought to have a plaque posted above the sink, “Divine service performed daily.”

When a mother sees herself in this role, she becomes the sunshine of her home.

Don't Act Like the Devil

Second, a mother should watch her tongue. Paul said she

should not be a "false accuser." The Greek word translated "false accuser" literally means "a slanderer."

I think it is interesting that in other places in the Bible that word is translated "devil." He was the first, and is still the greatest slanderer of all times. He slanders the name of God. He slanders the church of God. He slanders the people of God.

So, when Paul advises women not to be false accusers, he is literally telling them not to act like the devil. A person, no matter who they are, is never more like the devil than when they are slandering, falsely accusing, and condemning someone else.

Billy Sunday once said, "God save us from women who are angels in the church and devils in the home." It was Dale Carnegie who said, "There is many a woman who has made her own marital grave by a series of little digs."

A woman cannot be the sunshine of her home unless she controls her tongue. Unless she is an encourager and not a slanderer.

Danger — High Voltage!

Third, a mother should be a total abstainer. Paul's advice is literally, "you should not be a slave to wine."

The making of alcohol is the oldest chemical reaction known to man. And, the Bible has much to say about it. Whenever the scriptures speak of alcohol, they usually treat it much like an electric power station that has a high fence around it and a sign posted saying, "Danger — High Voltage!"

The scriptures everywhere recognize the danger of alcohol and warn against its addicting power. If alcohol had just been discovered, it would be hailed as the greatest tranquilizer man had ever found. That is, until we discovered the effects of it and then we would immediately outlaw it and classify any person who used it or sold it as a criminal, just as we do with other drugs.

But, because it has been around so long; and because so many of our law-makers drink themselves; and because there is an industry whose existence depends on its sale; and because

that industry maintains such a powerful lobby among our lawmakers, alcohol continues to be an acceptable part of our culture. But, that does not make it any the less dangerous.

We need to take a sober look at alcohol in America. Each year over 40,000 people die on the highways of America, many of them in alcohol-related accidents. Alcoholism is the third leading medical problem in America, following heart disease and cancer. Alcoholism is a factor in one-half the murders, one-fourth the suicides, and a majority of the divorces in America each year.

Alcohol always promises more than it can deliver. As Richard Blummer wrote, "We drink for joy and become miserable. We drink for sociability and become argumentative. We drink for sophistication and become obnoxious. We drink to help us sleep and wake up exhausted. We drink for exhilaration and end up depressed."

"We drink to gain confidence and become afraid. We drink to make conversation flow and become incoherent. We drink to diminish our problems and we see them multiply."

Alcoholism always increases when two things are prevalent — pressure and boredom. The more these increase in society the greater the danger of people turning to alcohol as a tranquilizer and an escape.

Women are especially vulnerable when the pressures of raising a family are great, when boredom is prevalent, or when they spend their time going to an endless round of cocktail parties. Since alcohol is the most available and most acceptable mind-altering drug, it immediately becomes the most prevalent and abused drug in America. The best way to deal with it is to "just say no."

You can't be the sunshine of your home unless you're sober.

An Ounce of Mother

Fourth, a mother should be a teacher of good things. Mothers are the greatest teachers in the world. As someone has said, "An ounce of mother is worth a pound of preacher."

In the first century young ladies did not have an opportunity for formal education. Whatever training they received for life, they received in the home. Paul was convinced that what women learned as they went through life should not be wasted. It should be passed on from the older to the younger. While Paul directs his remarks to what mothers should teach their daughters, it can and should just as readily apply to teaching all the children.

What are mothers to teach? Paul says they are to be “teachers of good things.” The word “good” is used in a moral sense. Mothers are not just to teach cooking and sewing and cleaning. They should teach their children values and morals. And, most of all, they should teach them the things of God.

To be the sunshine of your home you must teach your children the good things of life. What, specifically should mothers teach their children?

Seven Things to Teach

- She should teach them to use good judgment. The word Paul uses is the word “sober,” i.e., sensible, level-headed. Sound judgment, good thinking, level-headedness should always characterize God’s people. Children need to be wise in dealing with their finances, their mates, their children, and their friends. Friends are especially important. As the old time evangelist, Sam Jones, said, “You can’t run with dogs without getting fleas on you.”

- She should teach them to love their mate. Repeatedly in the scriptures husbands are told to love their wives. In fact, this is the most common and most consistent advice given to husbands in scripture. Here, to my knowledge, is the only place in scripture where a woman is told she should love her husband.

Love is the cement that holds a Christian home together. What is Christian love? It is not mere sentiment. It is not a passionate emotion. Love is caring about another person more than you care about yourself. It is being sensitive to their needs. It is seeking their highest good. It seeks to encourage, to

compliment, to build up the other person.

We all need, not only to be loved, but to be told we are loved. I was reminded of this need again recently by an elderly friend of mine. I travel a great deal in my work. When I go to another city I always buy postcards from that city and write four people — my mother, my grandson, my boyhood pastor, and a special elderly friend. On the cards to this friend I always close by saying, "I love you like always." Not long ago I wrote her and forgot to say that at the end of the card. A few days later I received a note from her wanting to know why I hadn't said, "I love you like always," on my last card.

It made me realize again that people not only need to be loved, they want to be told they are loved. And you can't tell them too often that you love them.

- She should teach them to love their children. People sometimes ask, "Can I love my children too much?" The answer is, "No! Emphatically, no!" But, you can love your children unwisely. The danger we face is going to extremes — being too strict or too lenient. Having too many rules or not having any rules at all. The Bible warns, "A child left to himself will bring shame to his mother" (Prov. 29:15).

Our children, like our mate, need not only to be loved but to be told they are loved. Whenever I am with my grandson I always whisper in his ear, "I sure do love you. You're my favorite boy in the whole world." The other day he was sitting on my knee and I said to him, "I sure do love you." He responded, in a matter of fact way, "I know that." I said to him again, "You're my favorite boy in the whole world." And he answered, this time even more matter of factly, "I know that too."

People need to be told they are loved, even if they already know it.

- She should teach them to be discreet and chaste. The Bible teaching on sex is clear. It is chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage. The rule of God's word is, "Marriage with complete fidelity to your marriage partner or total abstinence."

Children need to be taught this. They need to be taught this

in the home. If they were taught in the home there would be no need for sex education in the schools.

The writer of Hebrews said, "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled, but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4). The Living Bible translates the verse this way, "Honor your marriage and spouse and be pure, for God will surely punish those who are immoral or commit adultery."

- She should teach them to be a keeper at home. The phrase Paul uses literally means "be a worker at home," or "be occupied with home duties."

Psychologist Dr. Earl Schaefer said years ago, "We must create a new image of women, so mothers don't say apologetically that they're 'just a housewife' but take pride in their jobs as educators." Being a homemaker is a noble profession. It is the highest calling in life.

To be at home at night to tuck your children in bed, to say their prayers with them, to help them with their homework, to cook their good meals, is more important than attending every civic and social function in the community and more important than being at the church every time the doors are open.

Every year a larger percentage of our mothers work outside the home. If at all possible, it would be better for the children in the home for mothers not to work. But, I hear someone say, "You don't understand the high cost of living." I'm afraid sometimes it's not the high cost of living, but the high cost of living the way we want to live. And our children and homes are paying dearly for it.

- She should teach them to be good. The Greek word Paul uses literally means to be "kind." Few things are more important than kindness. I agree with Henri-Dominique Lacordaire when he said, "It is not genius, nor glory, nor love that reflects the greatness of the human soul; it is kindness."

Remember this, you may be sorry that you spoke, sorry you stayed or went, sorry you won or lost; sorry so much was spent. But as you go through life, you'll find you're never sorry you were kind.

We teach our children from the earliest age the verse, "Be ye

kind one to another." When we have learned it by heart we should take it to heart. We should be kind.

- Finally, she should teach them to respect their mate. Paul's actual statement is that mothers should teach their daughters "to obey their husbands." Love, respect, and acceptance are a part of that. William James said one of the greatest drives of mankind is the desire to be accepted. We all have a desire to be appreciated, complemented, admired. It's when we neglect the little things like showing honest appreciation that our marriages get into trouble. More marriages are wrecked by slow leaks than by blow-outs. Most problems in marriage are band-aid size at first, but if they're not given prompt treatment they soon demand major surgery.

Men, as well as women, should remember that. As someone has said, "Man does not live by bread alone, he needs buttering once in a while."

John Randolph, one of our early American statesmen, said, "When I tried to become an infidel, I fancied that I saw my mother standing with me with her hand on my head and her voice speaking in my ear as she taught me to say, 'Our father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . .'"

Randolph was saying he could not escape the influence of a godly mother in the early years of his life. May that be true of mothers today.

Every home needs the warmth and light that only a godly mother can bring to it. Children and husbands need mothers who will be the sunshine of the home.

Father's Day: The Failures of a Father

2 Samuel 18:33

It was Saturday afternoon and a little boy's father was out of town on business. The lad missed him and said sadly, "Families without daddies are no good." The boy was expressing something basic to the home as God intended it. Families need fathers.

William E. Homan, distinguished pediatrician, said, "No task in the world is more complicated and challenging than that of raising children." And to that I would add, in the raising of children there is no role more challenging than that of being a father. It is so very easy for a man to succeed at everything else he does and still fail at the most important thing he is to do — be a good father.

The Bible gives us a tragic example of this. David, the king of Israel, was immensely successful at many things. He was a successful king, a successful general, a successful financier, a successful writer, and a successful builder. But he was a failure as a father.

As a king he brought Israel into her golden age of power and world supremacy. As a general he extended her borders beyond anything she had ever known before. As a financier he amassed a great treasury. As a writer he wrote many magnificent psalms that still stir the hearts of people today. As a builder he established Jerusalem as his capital. And, he dreamed of building God a magnificent house of worship. When he came

to the end of his life, out of his own personal treasury, he gave Solomon \$60 million that would be applied to the building of the temple.

But in his most important role, that of being a father, he was a failure. David learned, as we need to learn, that it is easier to be a successful king than it is to be a successful father. It is easier to raise money than it is to raise kids. It is easier to conquer an enemy than it is to conquer your own pride and selfishness. Unfortunately, David learned these lessons the hard way.

So tragic is David's failure as a father that the Bible gives an unusual amount of time to the subject. There are in the Bible 41 chapters that deal with the life of David. They start when, as a lad, he was anointed by Samuel to be the king of Israel. And, they close with his death. Out of these 41 chapters, 15 of them deal with his childhood and rise to national prominence. Twenty-six of them deal with his reign as king of Israel. Sixteen of them, one-half of the scriptures devoted to his reign and one-third of the scriptures devoted to his entire life tell about the troubles he had. And most of them were related in some way to his family and his failures as a father.

David became king of Israel when he was thirty years old and reigned for forty years. Immediately upon his ascension to the throne he organized his government, trained his army, and extended the boundaries of his empire. He was a man of vision, action, progress.

But he soon fell in love with another man's wife and had her husband put to death so he could have her as his own. This was the beginning of David's troubles. From this point on there is almost nothing said about him except the troubles he had.

His eldest son, Amnon, lured his half-sister, Tamar, into his bedroom one night and raped her. Another of his sons, Absalom, killed Amnon when he learned what he had done.

In order to escape the wrath of his father, Absalom fled. For two years he was out of the country. David had now lost two of his sons, one by murder and one by self-imposed exile. Absalom returned to Jerusalem after two years, but was still estranged from his father. Two more years passed before he

even saw his father's face.

During this time Absalom plotted an overthrow and instigated a rebellion against his father. David, the king, was now forced to flee Jerusalem, his own capital, to save his life.

With David gone, Absalom took his father's concubines and slept with them in open disgrace and mockery of his father. David eventually mustered his army and countered the rebellion. In the battle that ensued, Absalom was killed. Though Absalom had rebelled against his father, still David loved him.

And when the news of his death came to David, the scriptures record some of the saddest words ever written. They are the words of a broken-hearted father over a rebellious son. "And the king was much moved, and went up into his chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, 'Oh, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, oh Absalom, my son, my son!'"

David's trials were not over with the death of Amnon or Absalom. Yet another of his sons, Adonijah, plots a rebellion against his father. David is now old and Adonijah thinks it is time for his father to step down and for a new administration to take over. But David is not willing to do that. So, Adonijah gathers an army of loyal followers and attempts to overthrow his father.

Then comes another sad commentary about David and his son, Adonijah. The scriptures say, "And his father had not displeased him at any time in saying, 'Why hast thou done so?'" (1 Kings 1:6).

That bit of morality injected into these historical books explains a part of the disastrous relationships David had with his three sons, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah.

From the tragic experiences of David we are allowed to see what a father should or should not be.

You Spell Love T-I-M-E

First, to succeed, a father needs to be available. David, as the king, was a busy man. There were many demands on his time.

There was a government to be run, there were finances to be raised, there were buildings to be built, there were battles to be fought, there were songs to be written. In the process of living David simply got his priorities mixed up. He had time for everyone and everything except his own children.

It's easy for that to happen. It was easy for David — it's easy for us. We sometimes forget that fatherhood is more than biological; it is also emotional and spiritual. To be a good father you must spend time with your children. You must be available to them. Someone has said, "The way to spell love is T-I-M-E."

We can believe, though the scriptures never say so exactly, David's children never brought their father a broken toy and, consequently, they never brought him a broken heart. They lived their lives on their own. They made their own decisions. Seemingly, their father was never available to them. He was simply too busy for his children.

Herein, I believe, is the greatest cause of failure by fathers. It is not that fathers, by and large, are incompetent; it is basically that they are unavailable. It is not that they do not know how to raise their children. That really doesn't take super knowledge or a degree in psychology. It's basically that they are absent.

The key to helping almost anyone in life is availability. That's why ministry is so difficult.

To minister to people you must be available to them at the most inconvenient times — when you prefer to be, or need to be doing something else. To help another you must be available to them when they need you and as they need you. It cannot be done at your convenience.

In the same way parents must make room in their hearts and then in their schedule for their children. No poor parent is too poor to do that, and no middle-class parent is too busy.

Good parenting does not happen accidentally or automatically. It takes time. It takes availability.

Dr. Elton Trueblood wrote, "My family life has not, like my teaching and writing, been a separate vocation, but has been deeply involved in nearly all that I have tried to do. You understand very early that family life is not automatic and that

in it, as in so much else of human life, achievement does not come without effort and thoughtful planning. Family affairs could not, we concluded, be assigned to the left-over space in the calendar, but must be scheduled with high priority."

"We don't want plush homes," cry our children. "We want our parents at home." We labor to buy labor-saving devices when we would do better to stay home and have less.

It's a wise father who realizes that his children do not want things from him so much as they want him. Availability, time together, is one of the greatest gifts you can give to a child. And, it's a secret to successful fatherhood.

I'd Rather See a Sermon

Second, a successful father must live a consistent life. The Bible may be the most honest book you will ever read. It never covers up the faults or weaknesses of its heroes. It presents them as they are, warts and all. David, though a great and good man, had many faults. And, the sins of his life, his failure to live right before his children, showed itself in their lives again and again.

Watergate was not the first government cover-up. David's most notable sin was his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband to cover it up. In time, we see those same sins cropping up in the lives of David's children. Amnon seduced his half-sister. Absalom slept with his father's concubines. And a part of the downfall of Solomon, David's fourth son and his successor to the throne, was sexual sins. The Bible says, "Solomon loved many strange wives." In the life and experience of David we see the sins of the father being reproduced in the lives of his children.

Everyone who studies the field of behavior tells us children need adult models. They need someone they can look up to, someone they can imitate, someone they can learn from through example. And such people are usually in short supply. As someone wrote, "Two things I've had in life and ample, good advice and poor example."

I like the poem of Edgar A. Guest entitled, "A Living Sermon." He wrote:

*I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one walk with me than merely tell me the way;
The eye's a better pupil, and more willing, than the ear;
Fine counsel is confusing, but example always clear;
The best of all preachers are the men who live their
creeds,
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.
I soon can learn to do it if you'll let me see it done;
I can watch your hand in action, but your tongue too fast
may run.
The lectures you deliver may be very wise and true,
But I'd rather get my lessons by observing what you do.
I may not understand the high advice you give,
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how
you live.*

You cannot teach more character than you possess. And advice without example is tragic and usually rejected. Children learn best by observing, by watching other people. The whole tragedy of David's life is that he was not a model for his children. Three out of four of his sons demonstrated the same sins they had seen in their father.

Dad, You're Trying!

Third, to be a successful father you must discipline your children. The scriptures say concerning David's dealings with Adonijah, "And his father had not displeased him at any time, saying 'Why hast thou done so?'" (1 Kings 1:6)

David put no restraints on Adonijah. He never made him pick up his clothes. He never made him help with the chores around the house. He never gave him a time to be in. He never questioned him and he never scolded him. He let him do anything he wanted to do.

You would think, after that leniency, Adonijah would have

loved and admired his father. But, the opposite was true. In the end he was a rebellious and ungrateful son.

If you do not discipline your children they won't grow up saying, "My parents loved me. They let me do anything I wanted to do." Rather, they will grow up saying, "My parents don't care what I do, why should I care?"

Someone has said that everything in our modern homes is controlled by a switch except the children. If we had more switches in the home we wouldn't need so many clubs in the community. The Bible says, "Foolishness is bound in the heart of the child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him."

Don't be afraid to displease your children. Don't be afraid to discipline them. Don't be afraid to frustrate them. Dr. Martin Symonds, a noted psychiatrist, said, "The sickest children are the ones who have never experienced frustration."

Grady Wilson, long-time associate to Billy Graham, said his mother kept a razor-strap in the kitchen and had a motto over it, "I need thee every hour."

History tells us that juvenile delinquency got worse about the time the garage replaced the wood shed.

The secret of crime prevention is not to be found in the electric chair, but in the high chair.

One of the reasons many young people cannot live under the authority of the law is that they did not learn to live under any authority in the home. No amount of political maneuvering alone will get us out of the predicament we are in. We must reestablish the spiritual authority of the home.

We, of course, must be realistic in our discipline. We can be too lenient, but we can also be too hard on our children. Paul wrote, "Ye father, provoke not your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

Children must be made to bend but not to break. They must be laced, but not so tightly as to restrict their growth.

Parents are going to make lots of mistakes. But, as Dr. Homan said, "A good parent is simply one who more than one-half of the time does the right thing." When you make mistakes, go to your children and apologize to them. Don't be afraid to

say you're sorry. Don't be afraid to admit your errors. They will understand and forgive you.

I was preparing to leave for a revival meeting years ago when my son Mike, who was eight years old at that time, said, "Daddy, why do you have to be gone to revivals so much?"

I said, "Mike, why do you care? All I do is fuss at you and whip you when I'm home. You don't like that, do you?"

He said, "No, daddy, but you're trying to do what's right."

When we try to do what's right, our children know it.

I read an interesting survey concerning young people and their parents. Do you know what young people said they would like to see most of all from their dads? Number one was for him to say occasionally, "I was wrong." And, number two was for him to control his ill temper.

It may have been out of this family background that Solomon, David's fourth son, wrote in the book of Proverbs, "Correct thy son and he shall give thee rest. Yea and he shall give delight unto thy soul" (Prov. 29:17).

John D. Rockefeller, America's first billionaire, was a devout Baptist and a great philanthropist. He believed in daily Bible reading, family prayers, Sunday School and church attendance, and total stewardship of life. He gave millions to education, research, and the cause of Christ.

His son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., said on one occasion, "It's a wonderful thing, this business of being a father. To have given the world one clean, honest, god-fearing son, with an active sense of his responsibilities and obligations, is about as large a contribution to our day and generation as any father can hope to make."

He was determined to pass on to his children the wonderful heritage he had from his father — love, companionship, and, above all, high standards of integrity and honor.

That should be the resolve of every father this Father's Day. The need of the hour in our nation, in our world, in our community, is for fathers like Joshua who will stand and say, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). Will you do it?

July Fourth: The Strength of the Nation

Prov. 14:34

As long as I can remember the currents of patriotism have run deep within me. Some of my earliest recollections of childhood have to do with high hours of patriotism that took place in a small southeast Texas town of Silsbee where I attended the second and third grades. The whole school met for assembly in the auditorium once a week. And the assembly always began with a pledge to the flag and the singing of “America the Beautiful.”

I did not know much about America in those days. I did not understand our system of government. I was not aware of America’s place in world affairs. I had little understanding of the problems that we were facing as a nation . . . and I did not know God at all. But as we pledged the flag and as we sang that great hymn I felt I was a part of something great and good. And there stirred in me feelings of pride and joy and gratitude.

That was more than half a century ago, and since then a lot of changes have taken place in the world and in me. I now understand our system of government better and I now see our role in world affairs clearer. And I am much more aware of our strengths and weaknesses. But one thing has not changed — my feelings about my country. And if you were to stand beside me at a Saturday afternoon football game when we sing the “Star Spangled Banner” you might see a tear in my eye as I think about my country.

One of the reasons I feel this way is my belief in the providence of God — my convictions that God has blessed us with freedom and prosperity for a purpose.

I share the conviction of Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said in 1884, “I assuredly believe that England has been raised up as a nation and brought to her present unique position that she may be a means of spreading the gospel throughout the nations of the earth. I judge that God has blessed two great nations of the Anglo-Saxon race, England and the United States, and given them preeminence in commerce and in liberty on purpose that in such a time as this they may spread abroad the glorious knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

David Tsutada, a Japanese Christian leader who spent two years in solitary confinement in Sugamo Prison during World War II because of his commitment to Christ, said, “There may be many reasons why the Lord has blessed America, but from my standpoint the reason for America’s greatness is that her churches gave so much for mission work.”

Even Thomas Paine said during the American Revolution that “the cause of America is the cause of mankind.”

If this is true, if these men were right, we must then strive to keep America strong and free so it can fulfill its spiritual mission. But, how do we do that? Wherein lies the strength of America? The answer is found in scripture. The writer of Proverbs said, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34).

The word “righteousness” comes from a root word meaning “to be right.” It suggests the idea of moral uprightness and social justice. The word “reproach” means “to bend low” in shame, in disgrace, or in ultimate downfall.

The strength of our nation, then, is in our people walking in uprightness, standing for truth and justice, reaching out in mercy, bowing in reverence, and kneeling in submission before God. And sin, selfish and shameful living, will ultimately bring us to disgrace and downfall.

Clarence Flynn summed this up when he wrote:

*"I know three things must always be
To keep the nation strong and free.
One is a hearthstone bright and dear
With busy, happy loved ones near;
One is a ready heart and hand
To love and serve and keep the land;
And one is a worn and beaten way
To where the people go to pray.
As long as these are kept alive,
The nation and people can survive.
God keep them always everywhere,
The home, the flag, and the place of prayer."*

Where then is our nation's strength? It is in our families, our flag, and our faith.

Square Acres and Square Men

First, the strength of the nation is in the home. Listen again to the beginning of Flynn's poem:

*"I know three things must always be
To keep the nation strong and free.
One is a hearthstone bright and dear
With busy, happy loved ones near;*

The strength of a nation is found in the character of its people. But where is character shaped and formed? It is formed in the home! So, ultimately, the strength of the nation is in the home.

Plato said, "The life of the nation is but the life of the home writ large." Take the typical home of any nation and multiply it by the size of the nation and you will know what the nation is like. If the homes are places of love, respect, and discipline, the nation will soon reflect it. But if they are places of abuse and conflict and permissiveness, the nation will be that way also.

The great wall of China is one of the wonders of the world. Built of stone and bricks, it was begun in 221 B.C. and snakes itself 2,000 miles across the northern borders of China. The

walls are twenty-five feet wide at the base, twenty-five feet high and have thirty foot towers every two hundred to three hundred yards.

When the great wall of China was completed, the people settled down behind it with a sense of safety and security. The walls were too high for an enemy to scale and they were too strong to be battered down. But, in the first few years after the walls were completed, they were breached three times by the enemy. Was it because the enemy was able to scale the walls? No, they were too high for that. Was it because some foe battered them down? No, they were too thick for that. It happened because three times the enemy bribed a gatekeeper.

The people of China learned what we need to learn — the strength of the nation is not found in the height and thickness of its walls or the size and strength of its armies, but in the character of its gatekeepers. As Confucius said, "The strength of the nation is not in its square acres, but its square men."

If we are to remain strong as a nation, we must pay attention to our moral fiber. For it is righteousness that exalts a nation and sin is a reproach to any people.

My Mother, Drunk or Sober

Second, the strength of the nation is found in the spirit of its people. Listen to Flynn's poem once more:

*"I know three things must always be
To keep the nation strong and free.
One is a hearthstone bright and dear
With busy, happy loved ones near;
One is a ready heart and hand
To love and serve and keep the land;*

Whatever makes a person a good Christian ought also to make him a good citizen. It should make him patriotic. The scriptures say, "Honor all men, love the brotherhood, fear God, and honor the king" (1 Pet. 2:17).

But what is patriotism? It is not the same as nationalism.

Nationalism is blind loyalty. It says, "My country, right or wrong." And as G. K. Chesterton quipped, that is like saying, "My mother, drunk or sober."

Extreme nationalism is the belief that you have a right to dominate other nations. It is belief in the inherent superiority of your nation and the inherent inferiority of other nations.

The people of one nation are not inherently superior to those of any other — different, yes, but not superior. They may be healthier and wealthier, better educated, but they are not inherently superior.

Patriotism is something wholly different; it is a love of one's soil, an appreciation for one's heritage, and a respect for one's leaders. By the river bank of Babylon the psalmist sang, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." He, who played his harp for the king, would rather give up his talent and skill than his love for the native land. That's patriotism.

Old dictionaries, volumes such as might have been used by George Washington or Patrick Henry, define patriotism as "the spirit of acting like a father to one's country; a public spiritedness." Another dictionary called patriotism "the quality of respect of one who is devoted to his country in a fatherly fashion." This has little to do with war or nationalism, but it has a lot to do with the word "respect."

Respect for the family, respect for the nation and the land, respect for the flag and the law, respect for mankind, and respect for oneself — these are the real ingredients of patriotism, and these are the values of the past that we must re-learn if we hope to survive as a civilization.

Abraham Lincoln spoke of the highest kind of patriotism when he said, "I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to the light I have . . . I must stand with anybody who stands for right, stand with him while he is right, and part with him when he goes wrong."

As Christians we are to inculcate in ourselves and our children a love for and a loyalty to all that is great and good in

our country's heritage, a profound admiration for its men of virtue and a responsibility to see that the nation is kept strong and free.

We are to avoid as the plague what Toynbee calls, "the grim shape of a pagan worship of sovereign national states," which in our day is built upon pride, and which inevitably will breed isolation, suspicion, cynicism, falsehood, and finally brutality and conquest by the latest demagogue.

"Man," as Martin Luther told us, "always has a God or an idol." Our goal as Christian patriots is to work and pray that all persons may be governed by God and not ruled by tyrants.

Patriotism, then, in the highest and best sense, is not making a loud noise on the Fourth of July. It is not preaching a selfish and narrow Americanism. It is not pride in mere material prosperity. It is not boastful of American superiority. Patriotism is hearing the call of God and following the providential guidance of God amid the perplexing problems of our day. Patriotism is allegiance to the teachings of Jesus Christ . . . patriotism is carrying our spiritual loyalty into all the political affairs of government for it is righteousness that exalts a nation and sin is a reproach to any people.

God Bless America

Third, the strength of the nation is found in our faith. Look at Flynn's poem one final time.

*"I know three things must always be
To keep the nation strong and free.
One is a hearthstone bright and dear
With busy, happy loved ones near;
One is a ready heart and hand
To love and serve and keep the land;
And one is a worn and beaten way
To where the people go to pray.*

Ultimately, the strength of our nation is found in its biblical heritage. This is not to say that all our founding fathers were

Christians or that they always lived by the teachings of the Bible. But it is to say they believed in God and established our nation on principles that come from scripture.

It was Thomas Jefferson who said, "Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure, when we have removed their only firm basis — the conviction in the minds of people that these liberties are the gift of God?"

Read the documents of our nation. Listen to our pledge to the flag. Look at the inscriptions on our money and you will be reminded of our religious heritage.

On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed in the city of Philadelphia, marking the birth of our nation. We often forget that, in declaring independence from an earthly power, our forefathers made a forthright declaration of dependence upon Almighty God. The closing words of this document solemnly declare: "With firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

In the summer of 1787 representatives met in Philadelphia to write the constitution of the United States. After they had struggled for several weeks and had made little or no progress, eighty-one year-old Benjamin Franklin rose and addressed the troubled and disagreeing convention that was about to adjourn in confusion.

"In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine Protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor . . . have we now forgotten this powerful friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need his assistance?"

"I have lived, sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of man. And, if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, sir, in the Sacred Writings, that except the Lord build a house, they labor in vain that build it.

I firmly believe this . . .

"I therefore beg leave to move that, henceforth, prayer imploring the assistance of heaven and its blessings on our deliberations be held in this assembly every morning."

The very purpose of the Pilgrims coming to America in 1620 was to establish a government based on the Bible. The New England Charter, signed by King James I, confirmed their goal as ". . . to advance the enlargement of Christian religion, to the glory of God almighty. . ." The Mayflower Compact begins with the words, "In ye name of God, amen."

One of George Washington's early official acts was the first Thanksgiving Proclamation, which reads, "Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits and humbly implore his protection and favor . . ." And then he goes on to call the nation to thankfulness to God for his blessings.

Do you still have doubts about our spiritual heritage? Look, then, at a one dollar bill. In the middle of the bill you will find our motto, "In God we trust." On the right side is the seal of the United States. On the left side is the back side of that seal, a pyramid with a gigantic eye at the top of it. The eye represents the eye of God. Above the pyramid is the inscription in Latin, "He smiles on our beginnings." And beneath it in Latin are these words, "A new order of the ages."

Our founding fathers labored under the conviction that they were beginning something new, something unique, and that it was being done under the watchful eye of God. It is that faith that makes us strong and it is that faith that will keep us strong.

When President Eisenhower took the oath of office, he opened the Bible to 2 Chronicles 7:14. It says, "If my people which are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sins, and heal their land."

That should be a watchword today. There is, I believe, no higher act of love for and devotion to our country than to bow in humility before almighty God.

In 1831 the French government sent Alexis de Tocqueville

to examine our prisons and penitentiaries. But he became intrigued by our system of government and its institutions and therefore devoted considerable time to analyzing life in America.

On his return Tocqueville wrote his classic, "Democracy in America," which scholars feel is probably the greatest book on any national policy and culture.

In it he said, "I sought for the greatness and genius in America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there . . . I sought for the greatness and genius in America in her democratic congress and her matchless constitution and it was not there . . .

"Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power.

America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

Tocqueville was right: "Righteousness exalts a nation but sin is the reproach of any people."

Arnold Toynbee, the distinguished historian counts nineteen civilizations that have existed since man began to form governments. Of the nineteen, only five still remain. Ours is one of them. Toynbee saw spiritual currents running throughout history. He said that no major nation has ever been murdered. They have committed suicide. They forgot the true purpose of their being, and rotted on the inside. Like Israel, they sought to be like all other nations. Instead of following God in spiritual conquest they followed a man of their choosing to go before them, and to fight their battles. We must not make the same mistake.

Clarence Flynn was right. The strength of the nation is in the family, the flag, and our faith.

As long as these are kept alive,
The nation and people can survive.

And our prayer ought to be:

“God keep them always everywhere,
The home, the flag, and the place of prayer.”

Thanksgiving: The Puzzlement of Jesus

Luke 17:11-19

To visit a leper colony is a disquieting experience. Leprosy is a skin disease that begins with white splotches and then eats away at the flesh and into the bones until various parts of the body are so decayed that they fall off. If left unchecked, it eventually leads to a horrible and painful death.

I made my first visit to a leper colony outside the city of Belem, Brazil. Several hundred people lived in this little community, isolated from the rest of the city. Almost everyone in the village suffered some disfigurement as a result of the dreaded disease. Some people were without hands, some without feet, some without ears, and some without a nose.

While leprosy is rare in today's world, it was common biblical times. One of the most intriguing stories from the life and ministry of Jesus has to do with his healing of ten lepers. Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem when they passed through a village where they encountered ten men with leprosy. As Jesus approached they "stood afar off" and cried out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

They stood far off because, according to Moses' law, lepers were to be isolated from all social contacts. They were forbidden to come within six feet of a whole person; and, if the wind was blowing from their direction they were to stay fifty yards away. If a person unknowingly came too near them they were to shout a warning, "Unclean! Unclean!" These men, mindful of the law

of Moses, kept their distance and made their request known.

Jesus gave an unusual response. He told them to go and show themselves to the priest. Once again, the law of Moses was specific. Before a person healed of leprosy could re-enter society they must submit to an examination by a priest and receive from him a health certificate saying they were cured. Then they were free to return to their homes and a normal social life.

In obedience to the Lord's instructions these men turned to go to the priest. And, as they went, they were cleansed. This miracle, in contrast to most of Jesus' healings, did not occur instantaneously. It came as they acted in obedience to his command.

One of them, who happened to be a Samaritan, turned back, fell at Jesus' feet, and with a loud voice glorified God and gave thanks to Jesus for his healing. Luke records the puzzlement of Jesus at this when he asks, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? None of those healed have returned to give glory to God except this one." Then Jesus told the man to arise and go on his way because his faith had saved him. He had returned to thank the Lord for his physical healing and received something far greater in return — spiritual healing.

The failure of the other nine men to return and give thanks to God left Jesus perplexed. That they should take the blessings of God and never say "thank you" was unthinkable to him. He wanted to know where the others were.

These ten lepers, I believe, are representative of most of us. And Jesus' question, "Where are the nine?" is a question for all of us. We all have reason to be thankful to the Lord for his blessings and benefits. But, so few of us, perhaps no more than one in ten, take time to say "thank you" to him.

When we read this experience from the life of Jesus, most of us rather piously conclude that we would have been the one to return, giving thanks to God. But, taking a candid look at scripture we would probably have been one of the nine; so exuberant with the gift that we forgot the giver.

Someone has well said, "So far as thanksgiving is concerned

the mass of people can be divided into two classes — those who take things for granted and those who take things with gratitude.” The challenge of our Lord is that we keep an attitude of gratitude all our lives. Thanksgiving for the Christian should not be just a time of the year, it should be an attitude of the heart. To be thankful means that we admit that we have received more than we deserve. Gratitude comes from a sense of unworthiness.

As we think about the attitude of gratitude that should characterize all believers, I want us to use the acrostic, T-H-A-N-K-S, as a guide in our thinking about things for which we should be grateful.

An acrostic is a word in which each letter represents another word. The use of the word T-H-A-N-K-S suggests six things for which we should be grateful.

T — Things
H — Helpers
A — Adversity
N — Now
K — Kindness
S — Salvation

An Oasis in Space

First, we should be thankful for things. Things are not all important in life, but they are important. And, all of us, especially we Americans, have lots of things for which we should be grateful.

Years ago one of our astronauts described the planet earth from space as “an oasis in space.” If the earth is an oasis in space, the United States of America must be a paradise in a barren wasteland compared to the rest of the world.

It has been calculated that if you reduce the world's population to a city of 1,000 inhabitants, 46 of those people would be Americans and the other 954 would represent the rest of the world's population. Those 46 Americans would receive one-

half of the income of the city, and the other one-half would be divided among the remaining 954 people.

The 46 Americans would have a life expectancy of 75 years, while the other 954 would live less than 40 years. The Americans would have 15 times as many possessions per person as all the rest of the people. And the Americans would eat 70 percent above the daily food requirements, while 80 percent of the rest of the people would never have what we call a good balanced meal. The dogs and cats of American people have a better balanced diet than most people around the world.

After a tour of the United States, a European was being interviewed on his impressions of our country. He had seen our gigantic cities with their skyscrapers towering into the heavens. He had inspected our great factories and seen their vast production. He had visited our great universities and seen our young people in the process of education. And when the reporter asked him what impressed him most he replied, "The size of the American garbage can."

Our garbage cans have a tale to tell. The average American throws away ten times his average weight in rubbish every year. The average European throws away five times his weight. The average Israeli throws away about three and a half times his weight. But most of the rest of the people in the world don't throw away anything. They need everything they have. They do not have the necessities of life much less the excesses of life.

We do have lots of things. And we cannot contemplate the multitude of them without being keenly aware that we have much to give thanks for. This was impressed upon me graphically years ago while in East Africa on a preaching crusade. I was in a little church with mud walls, dirt floors, and a thatched roof, deep in the bush country of Uganda. The preacher in the church was representative of his people. The only clothes he owned were those on his back. He had built his mud hut with his own hands. He had none of the luxuries of life. The people sat on the floor of that little church while I sat on a crude homemade bench. The Africans clapped in rhythm

as they sang their favorite song, "God is so good; God is so good; God is so good; He's so good to me."

They sang in their native tongue and I sang in English. In the middle of the song the pastor stopped the congregation, turned and looked at me, and, with a smile on his face said to his people, "Even our American brother can sing, 'God is so good.'"

And I thought, "Of all the people on this earth who ought to be able to sing, 'God is so good,' it ought to be the people of America."

That's why Jesus' question so probes our heart. Will we take for granted the things we have? Will we recognize God as the source of every good and perfect gift? Or will we take him and them for granted?

A tourist was watching some women in Mexico washing their clothes at a spot where hot and cold springs bubble side by side. They'd boil their garments in the hot springs and rinse them in the cold.

The tourist said to his guide, "I suppose the people here think Mother Nature is generous to them, do they not?" "No, senior," was the reply, "just the opposite. They are grumbling because she does not supply the soap."

The world does not owe you, or me, anything. It does not owe us a good job, perpetual good health, ample food, or a long life. These are blessings, not rights, that we can lay claim to.

John Steinbeck once wrote to Adlai Stevenson, "If I wanted to destroy a nation I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy, and sick. That may be where America is right now."

We must not allow the tender plant of gratitude to go untended in our lives. We should thank God for things.

I Pray for You Every Day

Second, we should be thankful for helpers. Someone has pointed out that every great character has had either a great friend, a great mother, a great wife, or a great teacher. We have

all had people who have helped us.

And they have helped us in a thousand ways — by speaking words of encouragement, by their prayers, by gifts, by sending cards, and by calling. So important has been the contribution of people to my life that I can honestly say, “I am what I am by the grace of God and the goodness of people who have helped me.”

Not long ago I conducted the funeral service of my boyhood pastor, Dr. John M. Wright. As I prepared for the funeral service I reflected on the tremendous influence he had on my life. I remembered one of the last times we spoke on the phone he said to me, “Paul, I pray for you every day.”

When he spoke those words he was almost ninety years old. He had not been my pastor, in an official sense, for thirty-five years. Yet, on a daily basis, he had called my name before God.

As the Christians in Corinth helped the apostle Paul through their prayers (2 Cor. 1:11), so he had helped me. It is help like that that has sustained me through life and for which I am grateful.

I realize now I have not said “thank you” nearly enough to people who have helped me. And I’m determined not to make that mistake again. So, when people do nice things for me, I make it a point to express my gratitude in writing. Sometimes they tell me in advance it is not necessary for me to write them. But I do it anyway. I am determined that gratitude will not die in me, and the only way to keep it alive is to express it. I don’t want to be one of the nine.

Jesus Christ and Adversity

Third, we should be thankful for adversity. Somebody has said, “Travel broadens you and troubles deepen you.” Given my choice, I will take travel.

But, as unpleasant as it may be, adversity is good for us. J. C. Penney, the great retailer, was once asked what the two greatest motivators were in his life. Without hesitation he said, “I can tell you in four words: Jesus Christ and adversity.” He

went on to explain that adversity taught him never to give up, to always start over again, and to keep his faith strong.

Adversity in life is like temper in metal, it gives it strength. Metal that is tempered can be sharpened to an edge and made into a useful tool.

There is no way to overcome adversity, no way around it. The only way out is through it. And when you go through it you discover that it is a hammer that beats out Christian character on the anvil of life. And, we discover, sometimes for the first time, God's sustaining power.

Like Job, we don't understand all of God's ways, but even the Lord was not spared from suffering. I would not ask to go through a world without sorrow and suffering which increases sensitivity toward others and God. All of this is why we say with the apostle Paul that we glory in tribulation.

Relish the Moment

Fourth, we should be thankful for now. We should not live our lives anchored to the past or apprehensive about the future. We should live them in appreciation and enjoyment of the present. As Clovis Chappel said, "Today is all I need, all I can handle, and it may be all I have." Time can't be saved, only savored.

A long-time friend who was in fund raising said to me, "I don't want to spend the rest of my life at this job. No matter how much I do, it's never enough. The pressure is just too great."

One week later the small plane in which he was traveling crashed and he was killed instantly.

When he said that to me, neither of us would have believed he had only seven days left to live.

Don't wait until you're sixty-five to do your thing. Do it now and be grateful for today.

Robert J. Hastings said this beautifully in a little essay he wrote entitled, "The Station."

"Tucked away in our subconscious is an idyllic vision. We see ourselves on a long trip that spans the continent. We're traveling by train. Out the window we drink in the passing scene of cars on nearby highways, of children waving at a crossing, of cattle grazing on a distant hillside, or smoke pouring from a power plant, of row upon row of corn and wheat, of flatlands and valleys, of mountains and rolling hillsides, of city skylines and village halls.

But uppermost in our minds is the final destination. On a certain day at a certain hour we will pull into the station. Bands will be playing and flags waving. Once we get there so many wonderful dreams will come true and the pieces of our lives will fit together like a complete jigsaw puzzle. How restless we pace the aisles, damning the minutes for loitering, waiting, waiting, waiting for the station.

"When we reach the station, that will be it!" "When I'm eighteen!" "When I buy my new 450-SL Mercedes Benz!" "When I put the last kid through college!" "When I have paid off the mortgage!" "When I get a promotion!" "When I reach the age of retirement, I will live happily ever after."

Sooner or later we must realize there is no station, no one place to arrive at once and for all. The true joy of life is the trip. The station is only a dream. It constantly outdistances us.

"Relish the moment" is a good motto, especially when coupled with Psalm 118:24, "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." It isn't the burdens of today that drive men mad, it's the regrets over yesterday and the fear of tomorrow. Regret and fear are twin thieves who rob us of today.

So, stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Instead, climb more mountains, eat more ice cream, go barefoot more often, swim more rivers, watch more sunsets, laugh more, cry less. Life must be lived as we go along. The station will come soon enough.

Be Kind to Everyone

Fifth, we ought to be thankful for kindness. People have been unusually kind to me in life. Only occasionally has someone been rude, cruel, or ugly. Even when I have made mistakes, when I have failed in my duty, they have still been kind to me; and for that I am grateful.

I am reminded that very few people go through life without having at least one knock down punch — a divorce, a rebellious child, an alcoholic spouse, an untimely death, a financial reversal, or a career failure. When things like that happen to people we know we should be quick to throw ropes, not rocks.

Jeff Ray, a long-time teacher at Southwestern Seminary, used to say to his students, “Young men, be kind to everyone, because everyone is having a hard time.” I’ve tried to remember that.

We need to pray like the young girl, “Dear Lord, make all the bad people good and all the good people kind.”

The Greatest Need

Sixth, we should give thanks for salvation. Through Christ, God has provided what we all need most in life — a savior. As someone has said,

“If our greatest need had been information . . .

God would have sent us an educator.

If our greatest need had been technology . . .

God would have sent us a scientist.

If our greatest need had been money . . .

God would have sent us an economist.

If our greatest need had been pleasure . . .

God would have sent us an entertainer.

But our greatest need was forgiveness . . .

So God sent us a savior.”

When I think of where I came from, of who I ran with and what I was exposed to, I am driven to my knees in gratitude to

God for his salvation. Without it I would be no different from the drug pusher, the alcoholic, or the hardened criminal.

And, it was all of grace. None of merit. The Bible says that our righteousness is “as filthy rags.” The word for “rags” in scripture represents the clothing worn by a leper. As I said earlier, lepers were outcasts, untouchables. So, my righteousness is like the disease ridden rags worn by an outcast. But, God, through Jesus Christ, claimed me and cleansed me and clothed me in his righteousness.

Jesus’ perplexity at these lepers is a challenge to us. We must not become so enamored with the gift that we forget the giver. We must not concentrate more on the result than on the one responsible.

As Israel approached the Promised Land Moses warned them, “When thou has eaten and are full, beware lest thou forget the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage and into this land” (Deut. 6:12).

The Lord has been good and we should be grateful. So, this thanksgiving don’t forget to remember. As the psalmist said, “It is good to give thanks to the Lord” (Ps. 90:2).

Christmas: The Reason for the Season

As she came out of church one Sunday, a young girl said to me, "I need a conference with you, Pastor. I'm confused about the real meaning of Christmas." I can see how that could happen to anyone, regardless of their age. It's possible to become so intrigued with the tinsel and glitter that we miss the starlight and straw.

One little boy summed up the confusion of many as he and a friend shopped at Christmas time. He picked up a greeting card, and seeing the infant Jesus depicted on it, nudged his friends and exclaimed, "Imagine that! They're even trying to drag religion into Christmas now!"

Don't misunderstand me. I like everything about Christmas. I like Christmas trees. I like Christmas lights. I like Christmas cards. I like Christmas gifts. I even like Santa Claus. And, if that were all there was to it, it would be worth all we put into it because, for at least a little while at Christmas time, all the world is a better place.

But, the real meaning of Christmas is not to be found in any of those things. To discover the real reason for the season we need to look again at the Christmas story as recorded in scripture.

Matthew, in his gospel, tells us that the birth of Jesus happened like this: Mary, a young Jewish maid, was engaged to Joseph, a Jewish man. According to Jewish custom, engagement lasted one year before the actual marriage took place. And, although the couple did not live together as husband and

wife, they were considered legally married, and to break the betrothal took a writing of divorcement. It was during this period of time that it became evident that Mary was going to have a baby.

Naturally, Joseph was distressed when he learned this. He knew the child was not his and he assumed Mary had been unfaithful to him. According to Moses' law, adultery was punishable by death and he had every right to have her publicly stoned to death. She had apparently not only disgraced herself, she had also disgraced him. But, being a kind and merciful man, rather than make her a public example Joseph determined to quietly divorce her.

While he turned these things over in his mind an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. "The child," the angel told him, "was conceived in her by the Holy Ghost." The child was not the result of Mary's unfaithfulness to Joseph. The conception was a miracle of God. It would be a virgin birth.

The angel then told Joseph that when the child was born he should "call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins."

Then Matthew adds this postscript, "Now all of this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet (Isaiah) saying, 'Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us'" (Is. 7:14).

Joseph was then awakened from his sleep and did as the Lord commanded him. He took Mary to be his wife, and when the child was born he exercised the prerogative of a father and, in obedience to God, named him Jesus.

In those two names, the one predicted by Isaiah and the one commanded by the angel, you'll find the real meaning of Christmas. The name Emmanuel tells us who Jesus is. The name Jesus tells us why he came.

The name "Emmanuel" means "God with us." And the name "Jesus" means "Jehovah is salvation." It is the same as the Old Testament name "Joshua." As Joshua in the Old Testament led

Israel from the wilderness to the Promised Land, so Jesus, as the captain of our salvation, would lead all mankind from the bondage of sin to the Promised Land of God.

So, Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation (i.e., God becoming flesh). It commemorates the time when God invaded this small planet; when omnipotence was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. It is the celebration of the fact that God has come to live among us, to reveal himself to us, to identify with us, and to give himself for us. It commemorates a time when God became flesh and dwelt among us in order to be our savior.

It is clear, then, that the real meaning of Christmas centers in Jesus Christ. If there had been no Christ there would be no Christmas. He is the reason for the season.

When I think of the real meaning of Christmas, three words come to mind — revelation, identification, and salvation. Those three words explain the reason for the season. They tell us why the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Incarnation Was For Revelation

The first reason for the incarnation was revelation. To know God has been the desire of people through the ages. There has never been a time, from prehistoric man until the present, when people did not want to know God. A Roman historian wrote that he could find in his time cities without a stadium and cities without a theater, but he could not find cities without a temple. There is an inner longing in the heart of each person to know God.

But, how can we know one who is indescribable and incomprehensible? We can look up into the heavens and see some revelation of God. We can see design and purpose and power. But we cannot know God fully.

There are great revelations of God in the Old Testament, but they are all partial. If you want the surest and purest revelation of God you must find him in Jesus Christ.

The disciples once said to Jesus, “Show us the Father and we

will be satisfied." Jesus responded, "Have I been so long with you and you have not known me? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

If you should ask, "What is God like?" I would reply, "He is like Jesus Christ." If you should then ask, "How much like Jesus Christ?" I would reply, "Exactly like Jesus Christ." Or, in the vernacular of west Texas, "He is the spittin' image of God." Or as Paul put it, "In him all the fullness of the Godhead dwells."

Some suggest we can see God in all religions. Theologian Karl Barth stood before students and faculty at Princeton in 1963 during his Princeton Lectures. A student asked, "Sir, don't you think God has revealed himself in other religions and not only Christianity?" Barth stunned many who were present when he thundered, "No, God has not revealed himself in any religion, including Christianity. He has revealed himself in his son."

The essence of Christianity is this: Jesus Christ is God. He is not just a part of God, or just sent by God, or just related to God. He was and is God.

Plato said that God is so vast that he is indescribable. The ancient Greeks thought that God was incomprehensible. So what did God do? He came down so we could comprehend him. As John put it, "God became flesh and dwelt among us."

It had to be that way. A foreigner who expresses himself to me in Japanese will not get very far. That is a foreign language and I don't understand it. Neither could God get far in expressing himself to me in celestial language. However, if God expressed himself to me in flesh, I can understand that. That's what I am. That's where I live.

Jesus is God in flesh, getting down on my level where I can comprehend him. As S. D. Gordon put it, "Jesus is God spelling himself in language we can understand."

Michaelangelo expressed himself in marble;
Rembrandt expressed himself in oils;
Handel expressed himself in music;
Shakespeare expressed himself in prose and verse;

And God expressed himself in flesh. There is nothing more expressive than flesh. The twinkle of an eye, a smile on the face, a warm handshake, a rosy cheek, these are all great expressions. They all communicate.

He became a man. That's the real meaning of Christmas. That's the reason for the season.

Incarnation is for Identification

The second reason for the incarnation was identification. God came not only to reveal himself to us but to identify himself with us. Someone has said, "To walk in another man's shoes you must first take off your own shoes." That's what the Lord did in the incarnation. He took off his divinity in order to put on our humanity. In order to identify with us, the great God of heaven stripped himself of his deity and became one of us. That's the reason for the season. The incarnation was for the purpose of identification.

One of the most famous tsars of Russia was "Peter the Great." When he came to power Russia was an isolated and backward land.

His father, Tsar Alexis, like the rulers before him, had been far removed and inaccessible to his subjects. The tsars were all august figures, enclosed in an aura of semi-divinity. But Peter was not like that. He freely moved among his people and identified himself with them.

Peter had an inquiring mind and frequently associated with the foreign merchants who lived in his country. He soon became fascinated with western civilization and desired to modernize his country.

On one occasion he sent a "great embassy" of more than 250 of Russia's young men, from the noblest of families, to western Europe for more than eighteen months to study seamanship, navigation, and ship-building. They would go to learn about western civilization and bring ideas back to re-mold the country along western lines and open the country to Europe. They would modernize Russia and cause it to emerge with new

influence in the world.

The most remarkable thing about all this is that the tsar himself traveled with the great embassy, incognito. He traveled as a mere member of the ambassador's staff to see and learn for himself.

In a sense, that's what Jesus Christ did. He traveled from heaven to earth incognito. He was born in a manger in Bethlehem. He grew up in a carpenter's shop in Nazareth. He died on a cross in Jerusalem. And, he did it, not only to reveal God to us, but to identify himself with us.

He was born in a stable, not in a mansion, that he might identify with the homeless of our world; he was born in Bethlehem, the house of bread, and not in Athens, that he might identify with the hungry masses; he grew up in the home of a carpenter, rather than the home of a Caesar, that he might identify with the working class; he was born a Jew and not a Greek, that he might identify with the oppressed, the despised, and the rejected of all times. And, he died on a cross and not in a hospital to share the suffering of the world. He was born and reared at the crossroads of the world that touches Africa, Asia, and Europe, because he belongs to the whole world.

Jesus' favorite term for himself was the "Son of Man." It is used over 97 times in the gospels. He called himself the "Son of Man" rather than the "Son of God" because he really was the representative man, the man in whom humanity finds its perfect expression, its perfect example, its consummation, and its peak. As F. W. Robertson wrote, "There was in Jesus no national peculiarity or individual idiosyncrasy. He was not the son of a Jew, or the son of a carpenter; nor the offspring of the modes of living and thinking of that particular century. He was the son of man."

And what does all of this mean to you and me? The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them

that are tempted" (Heb. 2:17-18).

And again the writer of Hebrews writes, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:14-16).

Because he became one of us he understands us, relates to us, and can better minister to us. That's the reason for the season.

Incarnation is for Salvation

The third reason for incarnation was salvation. He came not only to reveal himself to us and identify himself with us. He also came to give his life for us. The son of God became the son of man that we who are the sons of men might become the sons of God.

Paul expressed the truth in these words, "He was made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5).

The apostle Paul said, "If in this life only we have hope we are of all men most miserable." Millions are like that today — miserable. They can be found everywhere. They fill the bars, the psychiatric wards, and cemeteries. They are also in the board rooms, class rooms, and operating rooms. They are people without hope.

Someone has said, "Let him turn your blues and your blahs into oohs and aahs." That's what he can do.

His redemption is from destruction — self-destruction as well as eternal destruction. We are, in many ways, our own worst enemies. We seem to be bent on self-destruction. When the scriptures say he would save us from our sins they mean in part that he would save us from ourselves.

On the cross Jesus said, "It is finished." That Greek word translated "finished" was used of a runner who had completed the race and crossed the goal line. It was used of a soldier who was sent on an assignment, a special mission, and had fulfilled it.

What did Jesus mean when he cried, "It is finished"? He meant the sacrifice was finished. There was no more need for more sacrifices. He meant death was finished. We need have no fear of it. He meant hell was finished. We now do not have to go there.

He did not say, "I am finished." He said, "It is finished." What was finished? The sacrifice, the conquest, and our redemption. And that is the reason for the season.

The young girl who wanted the conference with me is not here today. But let me answer those, just like her, who are confused about the real meaning of Christmas. Jesus is the reason for the season. Without Christ there would be no Christmas. It celebrates his birth, his coming.

Two thousand years ago, Caesar was on his throne in Rome, claiming to be earth's chief deity. But still he came.

Hostility instead of hospitality was a way of life in Bethlehem, but still he came.

The Lord had no army except a few Galilean peasants such as Peter, John, and, yes, Judas, but still he came.

He had no weapons except an open hand of love willing to take a basin and towel and be nailed to a cross, but still he came.

And, in his coming, you will find the real meaning of Christmas. He is the reason for the season.

But I simply remind you, it is not enough that Jesus was born in Bethlehem 1900 years ago. He must be born again in you by personal faith and trust. And, when he is, Christmas takes on a new meaning.

A Farewell Sermon: The Pastor's Last Commendation

Acts 20:32-38

"Parting," someone said somewhere, "is such sweet sorrow." I know the feeling. Leaving has never been easy for me. My pastorates were all happy and productive and my wife and I made life-long friendships. Moving away, for me, has always been accompanied by tears.

But, at the same time, leaving has been a time of excitement and expectancy at the new challenges and new opportunities that were before me and the chance to begin again.

The years and the tears have taught me several things about leaving:

First, leaving is a time for grieving. In my final sermon at Green Acres Baptist Church, after a seventeen-year pastorate, I shared some letters written to me by the third grade choir. (These are found in the following sermon.) Their writing of them and my sharing of them helped all of us deal with the grief of leaving in a healthy and humorous way.

There should be sufficient time between the resignation and the actual moving to allow time for grieving and healing. Two weeks is usually sufficient.

Second, it is a time for encouragement. It provides an opportunity to express love and appreciation for your mutual experiences of learning and growth over the years. If the parting is less than cordial don't take parting shots at the congregation or individuals. It is best to express love and appreciation even if it is not fully deserved. By so doing you will "heap coals of fire" on the heads of your critics (Rom. 12:20). (And, you may have reason to feel, where some church members are going they may need to get used to the heat.)

Third, leaving is a time to challenge the church to be all it can be under new leadership. It's also a good opportunity to remind the congregation of what it owes its new pastor. Retired Presbyterian minister, John

Anderson, expressed it best: "Help him; don't hound him. Hear him out; don't hush him up. Hug him; but don't hurt him. Hold him up; but don't hollow him out."

*If guidance is needed for a peaceful parting you might want to see my book, **Basic Bible Sermons on Handling Conflict** (Broadman, 1992).*

What follows is a farewell sermon that closes a joyful and productive pastorate. It can serve as an example of what I think such a sermon should be like.

"It is a disquieting thought," said Charles Dickens, "to do anything for the last time." This is especially true when a pastor preaches his farewell sermon.

When you have baptized new converts, when you have buried people's loved ones, married their sons and daughters, and counseled their children, bonds of love are formed that will last forever. So it is with a sense of sadness that I stand here today, because it will mark the end of a special and unique relationship.

Last week the children of the third grade choir wrote me some good-bye letters that speak of that relationship. They are letters I will cherish forever.

One wrote: "Thank you for being our preacher, thank you for making the sermons interesting, and a lot of times I knew what you were talking about." (I've got an idea a deacon wrote that and signed a child's name to it.)

Another wrote: "I'll miss you, Paul. Thank you for baptizing me. I'm sorry for wasting your time." (I've got to check into that one.)

And my favorite was: "It won't be much like it used to be without you. I'm sad you're leaving. But, I will get over it."

I'm sure you will soon be over me, but I will not soon be over you. I am richer, wiser, and better for having been your pastor these past seventeen years.

While leaving will be difficult for me, I realize in many ways it will be good for you. Every minister faces the danger of drawing people to himself instead of to the Lord. So it is often a good thing that a human voice be silenced so that we might lean more on God and less on a man. And I, like all preachers,

have my favorite way of looking at truth. It will be good for you to have someone else who will look at truth from a different point of view.

And, you have become so accustomed to my voice that I probably do not produce half as much effect on you by what I have to say as someone else who will say the same thing in a different way. Besides, ministers are like doctors. The test of their success is that they are needed no longer. The real test of our ministry is when people can stand without us, when we can say, "These people do not need me." I have that confidence in you.

In my years with you I have preached over 2,500 sermons. After all that, what is there left to say that hasn't been said before? Just one thing. It is the same message the apostle Paul left in his farewell sermon to the church at Ephesus: "Brethren, I commend you to God, and the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

The occasion of these words was very much like this today. The apostle Paul had completed his third missionary journey. On his way back to Jerusalem he met the elders of the church at Ephesus in the coastal town of Melitus. Paul had established the church at Ephesus and had been its pastor for three years. He had stayed with them longer than any other church he founded. Now, when they were assembled, in one of the most moving scenes in all the Bible, he delivered his farewell sermon to them.

He began by reminding them of his past ministry among them. He had labored humbly, faithfully, impartially, and sacrificially. He then warns them about the future. False teachers, like wolves, will attack the fold of God from without and within.

Then he spoke the words of our text. The young church at Ephesus was small in number and its leaders inexperienced. It was like an island in a sea of pagan superstitions, heathen religion, and immoral practices. What were its chances of survival under such circumstances? How could they endure in

such an environment? There was only one way. They must be guarded, protected by God and his word.

When Paul had finished they all knelt down and prayed. They then embraced one another and with tears bid each other farewell for the last time. And as they did Paul spoke the words of our text: "Brethren, I commend you to God and the word of his grace." That's my message to you today.

The word "commend" is a banking term. It means "to deposit," "to entrust for safekeeping."

It describes what we do when we take our paycheck to the bank. We entrust it to the bank for safekeeping. That's what Paul was doing with the church at Ephesus. He was entrusting it to the care of God and his word. He was saying, in essence, "I am leaving you, but I am leaving you in good hands. What does it matter that you do not have my presence and my sermons any longer. You have God and the word of his grace and that is enough for your security and maturity."

Why would the apostle Paul leave the church at Ephesus with such a commendation? It is because he knew the nature of God and the power of his word. He knew that God was ever present. And he knew that his word was all sufficient for their needs. It would guide and nourish them no matter what happened. What better could he do than entrust them to God and his word?

It is with that same sense of confidence that I, today, commend you to God and the word of his grace. Naturally, I am concerned about those of you who have come to know Christ as Savior under my ministry. I pray that you will stay faithful to the Lord and that you will continue to grow in his grace. But at the same time I have a calm assurance about the future. I am leaving you in good hands. I'm leaving you with all you will ever need to become all you ought to be.

Why then do I have such confidence? Why do I make such a commendation? It is because God's word is enduring; it is edifying; and it is empowering.

The Book Will Be Here

First, I commend you of God and the word of his grace because it is enduring. As my favorite verse in the Bible says, "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever" (Is. 40:8).

Paul was leaving the church at Ephesus. He knew they could no longer count on his personal presence for pastoral guidance. He knew they would no longer have his sermons. But that did not matter. They would have God and the word of his grace and that would be enough. Though he did not say it in so many words, the implication was: "God is eternal and so is his word. I am leaving but they are not. Take heart, the workers die, but the work goes on."

The older I get the more I try to distinguish between that which is passing and that which is permanent, between the eternal and the temporal. It is one of the keys to successful living.

What lasts in life? What is there that is eternal? God is eternal. When he was seventeen years old tennis star Andre Agassi was named to the U.S. Davis Cup team. Following his first victory he thanked the Lord for his strength and ability and then said, "The trophy won't last and we know the money won't last, but the Lord will last and that's what I live for." The psalmist declared the Lord is "from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps. 90:2). The writer of Hebrews wrote, "Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundations of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail" (Heb. 1:10).

And, God's word is eternal. It is eternal because it partakes of the nature of God, who is eternal. Rual Wallenberg was a Swedish foreign minister who worked to help save Jews from Nazi terrorism in Hungary in the days of World War II. In the television mini-series about his life, *Wallenberg: A Hero's Story*, there is a moving scene where an old rabbi calls his

people to worship. The Russians were closing in on Budapest and the Germans were ready to kill the few remaining Jews before they evacuated. In anticipation of what would happen, the rabbi urges his people to pray and read the Bible. One of the young men, a skeptic, said to him, "What good will it do? Maybe by tomorrow we won't be here."

The rabbi responded, "But our book will be. God's word will last forever."

Jesus said of God's word, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). And Peter declares, "The word of God liveth and abideth forever" (1 Pet. 1:23).

The tooth of time gnaws all books but the Bible. It has passed through critical fires like no other book, and it has endured the flames without so much as the smell of burning.

Old Ben Franklin said to Thomas Paine about his book, *The Age of Reason*, "He who spits against the wind, spits in his own face." The wind of the Spirit blows over the Bible. Its critics would do well to remember that.

So I am leaving, but God will not leave you and neither will his word. They will abide with you forever. Because God is eternal and because his word is eternal, I say with the apostle Paul, "I commend you to God and the word of his grace . . ."

Keep Growing

Second, I commend you to God and the word of his grace because it is edifying. God's word, said Paul, "is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among them that are sanctified."

The phrase "build you up" is the translation of one Greek word, which literally means "to be a house builder" or "to build on." It is a construction term from which we get our word edifice or superstructure.

It suggests that the Christian life is one of growth and development. Building on the foundation of Jesus Christ we are to construct a godly life. From our initial experience of

conversion we are to grow to “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

My friends, Milton and Barbara Cunningham, have two grandsons, Ben and Tim. On a visit to their home, Barbara was playing basketball with the boys, then age 6 and 4.

Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls had just beaten the Cleveland Cavaliers for the division championship. The boys were big Michael Jordan fans, so they played like they were Michael Jordan and Barbara was the Cleveland Cavaliers.

The basketball goal had been lowered so the boys could dunk the ball, and they took turns dribbling around their grandmother to slam dunk it. Tim was about to drive for the basket, when he stopped and said to Barbara, “Mama-do, can God slam dunk?” She replied, “Honey, I’m sure he can. The Bible says he can do anything.”

That seemed to satisfy him, so he made his shot and then gave the ball to his brother. When Tim got the ball again, he put the ball on his hip, and said, “Mama-do, is God as good as Michael Jordan?” She replied, “Honey, I think so. The Bible says he’s the greatest. There’s no one better than him.”

Then Tim said, without blinking his eyes, “Well, maybe I ought to try to be more like God than Michael Jordan.”

Kids once sang a little jingle from a commercial featuring Jordan, “I want to be like Mike. I want to be like Mike.”

The theme song of the Christian is, “I want to be like Jesus. I want to be like Jesus.” To become like Christ is the goal of the Christian life.

Sadly, many Christians do not progress beyond their conversion experience. They remain spiritually immature all their lives. It is tragic to see Christians stopping short of their potential. It is unfortunate for people with Cadillac ability to be making a garbage truck contribution in life. It is grievous to see Christians like a child riding a rocking horse — plenty of motion, but no progress.

How do we grow to be like Christ? How do we mature in our faith? It does not come easily or automatically. As Mother Teresa put it, “Our progress in holiness depends on God and

ourselves — on God's grace and our will to be holy. We must have a real living determination to reach holiness."

One of the most important things, if not the most important, we can do to grow spiritually is to have adequate spiritual nourishment. Peter wrote, "as newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:2). God's word is as essential for our spiritual growth as milk is for a baby's physical development. But God's word is more than milk. It is also spiritual meat (Heb. 5:12) and bread (Matt. 4:4) and honey (Ps. 119:103, Ps. 19:10). It is a balanced diet for healthy growth. Taken in on a regular basis and in sufficient portions, it will bring us to spiritual maturity.

That's one of the main reasons God gave us his word. The aim of Bible study is not primarily to build up a reservoir of knowledge so that we might be elevated to a position of a teacher, but to mature us until we conform to the image of his son.

Friends, in God and his word you will find everything you need to become all you ought to be. Other books may be helpful but no other book is necessary. The Bible is all sufficient for your spiritual development.

So because God and his word are able to build you up, to mature you, I say along with the apostle Paul, "Brethren, I commend you to God and the word of his grace."

There's Power, Power, Wonder Working Power

Third, I commend you to God and the grace of his word because it is empowering.

Man's greatest need is not knowledge. Education alone will never redeem mankind. If knowledge changed behavior, no doctor would ever smoke. Dr. Mengle, who was in charge of human experimentation in the Nazi concentration camps, had both an M.D. and a Ph.D. degree.

Theodore Roosevelt said, "To educate a man in the mind and not in morals, is to educate a menace to society." The Duke of Wellington said, "Educate men without religion and you make

them but clever devils." Even one psychiatrist was reported to have said, "I can deal with madness, but not with badness."

What we need is redemption and transformation. We need both the desire and the ability to change. Only God and his word can give us that.

So Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that God and the word of his grace are "able to give you an inheritance among them that are sanctified." The word "able" is the Greek word from which we get our word "dynamite" or "power."

The word of God is more than words. It is power. As Paul said, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). And, as the writer of Hebrews said, "The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

The power of God and his word are vast and limitless. It is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. It is adequate power, it is abundant power, it is available power.

God and his word are able to save us (2 Tim. 3:15, James 1:21).

God and his word are able to strengthen us (1 Cor 10:13, Eph. 6:11).

God and his word are to secure us (2 Tim. 1:12).

God and his word are able to succor us (Heb. 2:18).

Cannon Streeter has defined power as "the ability to accomplish purpose." God's word is able to accomplish all he has purposed for us since the foundation of the world, i.e., our salvation, our sanctification and ultimately, our glorification.

So friends, what difference then does it make that I am leaving? What then does it matter that you will have my presence or my sermons no longer? You will still have God and the word of his grace. And that is enough. They will carry you on. That's why I can say with the same confidence of the apostle Paul, "I commend you to God and the word of his grace."

I do not want to close without calling your attention to how Paul refers to God's word. He calls it "the word of his grace." The word "grace" comes from the root word meaning "joyful" or "cheerfulness." It suggests that his word is a word of good news.

What is God's good news? It is that Christ tasted death for all men. It is that through repentance and faith salvation is offered to all people.

Some of you have heard me preach for seventeen years and have not yet done the one thing for which I have preached most often — that you make a full commitment of your life and heart to Jesus Christ. My hope and prayer today is that you will make that commitment now.

An Ordination Sermon: I Love Thy Church, O God

Psalm 84:1-2

Pastor Charles J. Grande tells that late on Saturday afternoon he was in his study putting the last minute touches on his Sunday sermon when he heard someone walking in the halls. He stepped outside to investigate and found one of his deacons walking around. The deacon said, "I often come to the church and walk about or sit and meditate. I love every brick of this building. I love the mortar between the joints. I love the plaster on the walls."

Pastor Grande said, "That day my deacon friend gave me a new appreciation for the church." The deacon could say with the psalmist, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, oh Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God" (Ps. 84:1-2). The Hebrew word translated "amiable" means "loved" or "beloved." The psalmist, therefore, was declaring his love for and devotion to God and his house.

What the deacon felt about his church and what the psalmist felt about the house of God ought to be how every Christian feels about God's house, especially those who have received a special call into Christian service.

The hymn writer Timothy Dwight expressed this truth beautifully when he wrote:

*"I love thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of thine abode,
The church our blest redeemer saved
With his own precious blood.
I love thy church, O God!
Her walls before thee stand
Dear as the apple of thine eye,
And graven on thy hand.
For her my tears shall fall;
For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be given
'til toils and cares shall end."*

The charge I lay before you this day is to love God and his house as the psalmist and the deacon and the hymn writer did. If you will do that, your ministry will be fruitful and enjoyable wherever you serve.

There are at least six things I hope you will always love about the church.

A Physical Monument to His Spiritual Presence

First, you ought to love the buildings of the church. Jesus, though he was a carpenter by trade, built no church buildings. He worshipped in synagogues and the temple and he taught by the seashore and on the mountainside. Nor did his early disciples build any church buildings. They met in rented halls, in private homes, by the river side, and in the catacombs.

Church buildings as such did not come into being until 250 A.D. Since the first house of worship was built, church buildings have assumed all shapes and sizes. I have worshipped in thatch-roofed huts in the jungles of central America, in red-brick chapels in county seat towns, in white-frame buildings in the open country, and in stain-glassed cathedrals in the inner city.

What is important about a church is not its architectural style or cost of its construction. What matters is that persons meet God there. That's one reason I love the buildings of the church

— I have met God there so often.

It was in the church that I first heard the gospel. It was in the church that I made my profession of faith in Christ. It was in the church that I was baptized. It was in the church that I heard and answered the call to the ministry. It was in the church that I was ordained. It was in the church that I was married. And, one day, it is from the church that I will be buried.

Because the buildings of a church are a physical monument to the spiritual presence of God, we ought to love them and make them the most beautiful and best kept buildings in town.

Dr. Porter Bales, one time pastor of the First Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas, said it well, “A church building should be as beautiful as a ballroom; as comfortable as a movie theater; convenient as a cafeteria; and attractive as a banking house.”

King David of Israel exemplified the spirit that ought to characterize the people of God about the house of God. He lived in a house of fine cedar and the Ark of the Covenant was in a tent. He knew this was not right and he purposed in his heart to build God a house worthy of his name. Though he was not allowed to build what he dreamed of he did draw the plans and raise the money. And when the temple was finally completed by his son, Solomon, it was one of the seven wonders of the world — a building befitting the king of kings.

Where Two or Three are Gathered

Second, you ought to love the gatherings of the church. If there's anything we Baptists have plenty of, it's meetings. I have attended so many meetings I sometimes feel like the man who was about to die. All of his life he had been faithful to his church. Every time the doors were open, he was there. Now he was on his deathbed.

In his last hours his Christian friends gathered around the bedside to comfort him. One of them said, “Brother Joe, just remember, in heaven there will be no partings.” He said, “I'm not concerned about the partings. I just hope there'll be no meetings.”

While we do have plenty of meetings at the church, we must not forget that they are important in God's plan for his church. In the Old Testament God often dealt with people in isolation, in seclusion. He met with Moses at the burning bush. He met Elijah in a cave on Mount Horeb. And he met with Samuel in his bedroom in the stillness of the night.

But, in the New Testament era, the Lord's most significant acts seem to occur when his people were gathered together. It was when the disciples were gathered in the upper room that he gave the Lord's Supper. It was while they were meeting together on the Mount of Olives that he gave them the Great Commission. And it was while they were assembled in prayer that the Holy Spirit came.

And our Lord has promised "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

It was in an ordinary church on an ordinary Sunday while listening to an ordinary sermon that God did an extraordinary thing in my life. And that's the way it ordinarily happens.

As Isaiah received his clearest vision of God and commission from God while in the temple, so it has been while I was in God's house that I have seen his glory most vividly, heard his voice most clearly, and felt his presence most profoundly (Is. 6:1-8).

Because it is in the meetings of the church that the Lord meets us and speaks to us most often and most profoundly we ought to love the gathering of the church.

Stand Up For Your Brother

Third, you ought to love the fellowship of the church. In the strictest sense of the word, people are not in the church, they are the church. We often speak of a certain buildings as "the church." But, it is not so. The buildings are the church house. The people are the church. The building is the place where the church meets. On Sunday the church is gathered. During the week the church is scattered.

The Greek word translated "church" in the New Testament

is the word "*ekklesia*," which literally means "the called out" or "the assembly." It was sometimes used to describe a political assembly such as the town-hall meeting mentioned in Acts 19:32-41.

Greek cities had a democratic form of government. Decisions were made by the citizens in meetings called by the mayor. When a meeting was needed a notice was sent and those who responded were called "the assembly" or "the called out" ones.

There are many analogies given in scripture for the church. Sometimes the church is called the bride of Christ. Sometimes it's called the building of God. Sometimes it is called the body of Christ. My favorite analogy is the church as the family of God.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "I write so that you may know how to behave yourself in the house of God, the church of the living God, a pillar and ground of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

The word "house" literally means "household" or "family." The church is not a building — though it meets in one. The church is not an organization — though it may be organized. The church is not just an audience — though it may look like one. It is a fellowship, a family of God's people.

If God is your father and God is my father, that makes us brothers or sisters in Christ. Some of us are old enough to remember when in the church people addressed one another "Brother" and "Sister." I'm not pleading for a reclaiming of that terminology, but I do wish we could recover the spirit of family in our churches.

As a part of the family of God we owe each other a great deal. The scriptures speak repeatedly of our obligation to each other:

- We are to love one another (Rom. 13:7-10)
- We are to serve one another (John 13:2-17)
- We are to be patient with one another (1 Thes. 5:14)
- We are to be courteous to one another (1 Pet. 3:8)
- We are to be models for one another (1 Tim. 4:12)
- We are to forgive one another (Eph. 4:32)
- We are not to judge one another (Rom. 14:4,13)
- We are to be subject to one another (Rom. 12:9-16)

We are to build one another up (Rom. 14:19)
We are to pray for one another (1 Sam. 12:23)
We are to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2)
We are to restore one another (Gal. 6:1)
We are to sympathize with one another (Rom 12:15)

When I was a pastor I used to close the services on Sunday evening by inviting the children to the front to visit with me. I'd sit on the steps of the platform and as they gathered around me I interviewed those who had a birthday the previous week. I would ask them their age, their birthdate, what present they liked best, and then I'd ask them to share a verse of scripture with the congregation.

One Sunday night I called the children forward and asked who had a birthday that week. One little girl lifted her hand and I called her forward for an interview. When I asked her birthdate I discovered she had not had one that week. Her birthday was still months away. So, I asked her why she had come forward. She said, "I'm standing up for my brother."

She then told me her little brother had his birthday that week, but he was too young and too timid to come forward and be interviewed. And she didn't want his birthday to come and go without notice. So she was standing up for her brother.

It occurs to me that if ever there was a time when we ought to stand up for our brother, it's now. And, if ever there was a place where we ought to stand up for our brother, it's the church.

It's not enough for us just to love God. It's not enough for us to love the lost world. We are to love one another also.

A Message Worth Dying For

Fourth, you ought to love the message of the church. The message of the church is this: "When we were without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commended his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"

(Rom. 5:6-9).

The words “without strength” suggest we were powerless to save ourselves. So when we were helplessly and hopelessly lost, God acted in our behalf by sending Christ to be our savior. Our redemption was an act of God’s love from beginning to end.

Salvation then is not a matter of race, place, or face. It is a matter of grace. Grace is God giving us his assets and taking our liabilities. Christ, though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor that we, through his poverty, might be rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

The good news of the gospel is not that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” That’s bad news. It is not that “the wages of sin is death.” That’s sad news. It’s that “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ the Lord.” That’s glad news.

For this message of grace people at one time gave their lives. In Bethlehem Chapel, Prague, Czechoslovakia, John Huss preached salvation by grace through faith and faith alone. But, in 1515 John Huss was burned at the stake — burned at the stake because he preached salvation by grace.

On a street in front of Oxford University, Oxford, England, there is a cross that marks the spot where, on October 16, 1555, two pastors, Hugh Latimer and Bishop Ridley were burned at the stake for preaching that salvation was not by the ordinances of the church, nor by pronouncements of priests, nor by keeping the rules and regulations of men. It was by grace, and grace alone.

As they died Master Latimer said, “Be of good cheer, Ridley; and play the man. We shall this day, by God’s grace, light up such a candle in England, as I trust, will never be put out.”

If such men as these were willing to die for the message of the church, we should be willing to love it and live for it.

Draw a Big Circle

Fifth, you should love the mission of the church. What is the mission of the church? Jesus crystallized it when he said, “You shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and

in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Our responsibility to win the world to faith in Christ begins at the end of our nose and our toes and grows in an ever-widening circle until it encompasses all people.

Carl Sandburg was asked whether there were any bad words. He replied he was aware of only one: "Exclusive — belonging to exclusive clubs, living in exclusive communities, attending exclusive schools." Ours is an exclusive world. We build fences and walls around our lives. With all of them the point is the same: keep out!

There is a sense in which the size of a human being can be measured by the circle he draws to take others in. The smaller the circle, the smaller the man. Most people draw the line at the edge of their own race and color, their own religion or social group or their own nationality. The people are too few who have the bigness of interest and compassion to draw a circle large enough for all.

How large should the circle of the church be? It should be big enough to include the least, the lowest, and the last of the lost. It must encompass all men for whom Christ died. It should be no smaller than the first one ever drawn on the earth. In the beginning, God gave the world its shape. He made it round.

Edwin Markham wrote a poem about the pride and prejudice that rejects and shuts out other people. He wrote:

"He drew a circle to shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had a whit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in."

That's what Jesus did on the cross and that's what the church must do today. He tore down the walls that shut certain people out and welcomed everyone to salvation on the same basis (Eph. 2:14).

That is our mission also. To love the mission of the church is to love all persons for whom Christ died.

The Main Theme of the Faith

Sixth, you should love the head of the church. The apostle Paul declared of Jesus, "He is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: Who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence" (i.e., be first) (Col 1:17-18).

To him, and to him alone, is due our supreme allegiance. Mother Teresa set things in perspective when a brother said to her, "My vocation is to work for the lepers." She corrected him, "You are making a mistake, brother; your vocation is to belong to Jesus. He has chosen you for himself, and the work you do is only a means of expressing your love to him in action."

And she practiced what she preached for she said of her own life, "By blood and origin I am Albanian. My citizenship is in India. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to Jesus."

That should be our commitment also. Jesus is to have first place in our lives and he is to have full control in the church. Both we and it belong to him.

The scriptures declare that "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it." Your calling and my challenge to you is to do the same. He gave his life as a sacrifice for the salvation of the church. Now we must give our lives in service for the success of the church.

Soul Winning Commitment: The Secret of the Harvest

John 4:35-38

Evangelist Jay Strack made nine visits to the Holy Land. On each of those visits he asked for and received the same Bedouin tour guide. And, on each tour he witnessed to the man. The last time he spoke with him, the guide was interested as to why Jay was so persistent in sharing his faith. Jay explained to him that they were friends and he simply could not fail to share the way of salvation with one about whom he cared so deeply.

The guide looked at him and said, "I understand now. You do not want to commit the sin of the desert." Jay was not familiar with that phrase, so his friend explained. To Bedouins, who are nomadic people, the ultimate sin is the sin of the desert . . . knowing where water is but refusing to tell others.

The sin of the desert may well be the greatest sin of churches today. We live in a wasteland of spiritual dryness and despair. And we know where the water of life can be found. To not tell others about it is the sin of all sins.

That means evangelism is not optional for us. It rather should be the obsessive obligation of the church.

But, how do we evangelize effectively? If we really want to know the secret we would do well to study the Master Evangelist, Jesus. The apostle John, in his gospel, tells us of one of the great evangelistic harvests in Christ's ministry (John 4:35-36). What he did and what he taught in this experience is the secret to a great evangelistic effort anywhere, anytime.

Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Samaria on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee when they stopped at Jacob's Well outside the city of Sychar. Jesus rested by the well while his disciples went into the village to buy food. Presently, a lone woman came to draw water from the well.

Two things were unusual about this. First, it was high noon and the women usually waited until the cool of the evening to draw water. Second, she traveled alone. The women of the village usually traveled in groups, chatting about the events of the day.

Jesus, who knows the hearts of all people, immediately recognized that she not only had an empty water bucket, she also had an empty life. The evidence, as John revealed later, was that she had been married and divorced five times and was now living with a man who was not her husband. She had flitted from man to man, from marriage to marriage, from relationship to relationship, looking for something or someone to satisfy the deep longings of her heart. She thought, perhaps another lover, another marriage, another affair, would do it. But they hadn't. Her life was as dry and as empty as ever. Disillusioned, she no longer troubled herself with the legalities of marriage. She now just lived with a man. Jesus viewed her life more as sadness than badness. She was not so much to be scorned as to be pitied. She was searching for something she had never found and, often, it is the one who is searching the most who makes the most mistakes.

Jesus broke the ice by asking her for a drink of water. The woman, in surprise, responded, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink of water?" Then John adds this footnote, "For the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans."

The Samaritans were a mixed race, the result of intermarriage between Assyrians and Jews centuries before. The Jews considered them as half-breeds, mongrels, dogs. So deep was their prejudice toward the Samaritans that they had no dealings with them at all.

Jesus, as we know from his numerous dealings with and various teachings about Samaritans, did not share this preju-

dice. So, he said to the woman, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that speaks to you, you would be asking me to give you Living Water."

The woman was thinking of physical water and wondered how Jesus could give her a drink since he had no rope or bucket with which to draw.

Jesus then moved quickly from the physical to the spiritual by saying, "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:13-14).

The idea of water that could forever satisfy her inner thirst captured this woman's attention and she said to Jesus, "Sir, give me that water."

Jesus then revealed his knowledge of her past immorality. This convinced her that he was a prophet. Jesus then told her he was more than a prophet, he was the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

With this thrilling revelation fresh in her mind she left her water pot and rushed back to the village to tell the men she had met the Savior.

In the meantime the disciples, having returned from Sychar, were engaging Jesus in a conversation about the will of God. As they talked, Jesus looked up and saw a great host of people — mostly men — dressed in white robes and turbans coming toward him. He then said to his disciples, "Say not ye, there are yet four months, and then cometh the harvest? Behold I say unto you, lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white (men dressed in white robes and white turbans) already to harvest" (John 4:35-36).

The men of Sychar began to talk with Jesus and they were captivated by him. So much so that they invited him to remain in their village for a time. He accepted their invitation and stayed with them two days, preaching and teaching.

John then adds this commentary: "Many of them believed on Jesus because of the sayings of the woman. And many more

believed because of his own words.” Don’t miss those two phrases set side by side: “many believed” and “many more believed.” They speak of the great harvest that occurred that day.

This whole experience, what Jesus said and what Jesus did reveals to us the secret of a great evangelistic harvest anywhere, anytime. There are three things that leap out at us: We must see the masses; we must seize the moment; and we must share the message.

We Must See the Masses

The first essential to an evangelistic harvest is to see the masses. As Jesus saw the multitude of people coming from the city he said to his disciple, “Lift up your eyes and look . . .” Why did he say that? Because his disciples had just been in the city of Sychar buying food and mingling among the same people who were now coming to meet Jesus. But they apparently had not witnessed to a single person. They brought no one to meet Jesus. Now the village, in response to the witness of this woman, was coming *en mass* to see and hear him for themselves. The disciples had missed one evangelistic opportunity and he did not want them to miss another.

Why had they missed that first evangelistic opportunity? For two reasons — because of preoccupation and because of prejudice. When they first went into the village they were so preoccupied with their own needs they did not think of the needs of others. They had been so interested in physical bread that they forgot to share the bread of life.

And, they shared the deep prejudice of their fellow Jews toward the Samaritans. It never entered their minds that God cared about the Samaritans or that the Samaritans might long to know God. The Samaritans were not their kind of people. They were of a different race, a different religion, a different culture. On the basis of preconceived ideas, deep prejudice, they were totally blinded to a whole city of people who were anxious to come to the Savior.

What the disciples did, we are in danger of doing ourselves — missing a great spiritual harvest, an evangelistic opportunity, because of preoccupation and prejudice.

Preoccupation is our greatest danger. We can become so wrapped up in making a living, running a business, raising a family, planning a vacation, or even pastoring a church that we crowd out the eternal things of life. We can so focus on our own needs and wants that we forget about the needs of others. We can so focus on the physical that we forget the spiritual.

Jesus warned us of this danger in the parable of the sower. When the farmer went forth to sow, some seed fell among the thorns. The seeds germinated and sprouted and the plants grew but the thorns soon wrapped themselves around the tender plants and choked the life from them. Jesus identified the thorns as “the deceitfulness of riches and the cares of this world.” We are in constant danger that the cares of this world may choke out the spiritual from our life also.

That’s why the apostle Paul, describing Christians as soldiers, said, “No man that warreth entangleth himself in the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier” (2 Tim. 2:4).

I spoke on this subject at an evangelism rally where an old friend was in attendance. Years before he had been a faithful witness and a discipler of men. So I asked him, “How are things with you?” And he replied, “I’m entangled. My new job keeps me from the ministry I used to have.”

Watch the thorns, they’ll get you!

Prejudice is another obstacle. These disciples were so blinded by their prejudice toward the Samaritans that they never saw the need or the opportunity. They thought, “These are not our kind of people.” They felt no responsibility toward them.

Larry McSwain, provost of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said, “We Baptists are missing the folks who are smarter and richer than we are, and who are dumber and poorer than we are.” The fact is, we’re missing those who are much different from us in any way.

Jesus does not share our narrow views. He tells us we are not

to miss anyone. In the Great Commission he commanded: "Go ye therefore and teach all nations . . ." The Greek word translated "nations" is the word "ethnos." From it we get the word "ethnic." It literally means every race, every tribe, every culture.

All around us there are ethnics, people of other races, other cultures, other nationalities, other languages that need to be won to Jesus Christ. And we must not be so absorbed in our own needs or so blinded by our prejudice that we do not see them and reach them.

By the way, the disciples would have missed the woman at the well for the same reason. They would have looked on her immorality as a sign of disinterest in spiritual things. But, how wrong they were. Her immorality was not a sign of spiritual indifference, but a sign of spiritual emptiness.

We need the focus and the passion of Mahatma Ghandi, the great Indian leader. The passion of his life was "the last, the least, the lowest, and the lost." Phillips Brooks reminds us, "We cannot believe in Christ for ourselves without believing in him for the whole world."

In the business world some companies are "niche marketers," i.e., they target only a small segment of the population and go after them. Those of us who follow Christ can never be "niche marketers." We must go after everyone. We must seek to win all people to Christ.

Someone has said, "We all live under the same sky, but we don't all see the same horizons." Some people see things others never see — potential, opportunity, challenge, need. We must lift up our eyes and see the need or we will never do anything to meet it.

We Must Seize the Moment

The second secret to a great spiritual harvest is to seize the moment. Jesus asked, "Do you say, there are yet four months, and then the harvest will come? I say . . . the fields are white already to harvest."

F. B. Myers said of this experience, "If those disciples had been appointed a commission of inquiry about the possibility of a Christian enterprise in Samaria, I know exactly the resolution they would have passed. The resolution would have been: Samaria unquestionably needs the Master's message, but it is not ready for it. There must first be plowing, sowing, and then waiting. It is needed, but it is not ready."

Can't you hear many of our ecclesiastical assemblies passing such a motion? We are always ready to recognize needy areas, but just as ready to find perfectly good reasons why we should do nothing at the present.

We must beware lest we spend so much time analyzing and organizing and agonizing that we never get around to evangelizing. Anyone remotely familiar with farming knows that the harvest is seasonal and soon passes. Crops go through three stages: green, ripe, rotten. The harvest is effective only at one stage. Likewise, intervention, at the right time, can produce rich spiritual harvest. When the harvest is ready to be gathered in, you must be ready to act. Urgency is essential.

Every indication is that our world today is ready. But too many of our churches are playing "hide and seek" in the county seat. We need to be reminded that any church that is not seeking the lost is lost.

In the movie, "Dead Poet's Society," Robin Williams plays the part of a teacher, John Keating. In his first class session, Keating takes his students into the hall to the trophy case and shows them pictures of heroes from the past history of the school. He says to them, "All these young men were as you are today — starting life with great promise. All of you will someday be as they are. They are all dead and so will you be. What do you think they would say to you? Get close to the glass." As the class leans toward the glass, Keating, in a raspy voice, says, "Carpe diem . . . carpe diem . . . carpe diem." Seize the day!

Dr. Baker James Cauthen used to say, "If we have anything to say to the world, we need to say it now!"

In the television mini-series, "The Kennedys of Massachu-

setts," Joseph Kennedy, the patriarch of the clan, said, concerning time, "There is little enough of it and none to waste." That must be our attitude when it comes to evangelism. There is no time to waste.

Lyndon Johnson's father used to say to him, "You must seize the moment." That's it! We must see the masses and we must seize the moment.

We Must Share the Message

The third secret to an evangelistic harvest is to share the message. The end result of this experience was that, "many of the Samaritans of the city believed on him for the saying of the woman. . . and many more believed because of his own words." Don't miss John's emphasis on "words" — her words and his words, human words and divine words, the words of a witness and the word of God. Sooner or later all evangelism must reduce itself to words. Somebody has to tell what God has done and what they have experienced. That's the secret of a great harvest.

This, I believe, is our basic problem. It is not that the harvest is not ready, but that we are not ready. Our job is simply to be faithful in sowing and reaping by witnessing. We all know we are to do that, but the minute anyone begins talking about it, someone says to himself, "The best way to do that is by example. I live my faith."

We ought to live our faith. And everyone knows 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 all the richness of the Christian Gospel.

I cannot, by being good, tell persons of Jesus' atoning death and resurrection, nor of my faith in his divinity. The emphasis is too much on me, and too little on him.

It would be the height of conceit to think that my life could ever become good enough to mirror these things very clearly to

other people. Yet they are the verities in which my faith stands. And I must bear witness to them.

Keith Parks, while president of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, said, "As far as I know we are never told in the scriptures that we should prepare the hearts of people. That's God's business. What we are told is to busy ourselves at sowing and reaping" (vs. 36-39).

It's God's business to prepare the hearts of people and he is always doing that. He furrows the hearts of men through scores of circumstances to prepare them to receive the gospel.

Sometimes it's the birth of a child, sometimes it's an illness, sometimes it's a financial reversal, sometimes it's a marital difficulty, sometimes it's a tragedy. And often times he's at work when we don't even recognize it.

James Gilmour, that heroic and solitary soul, the story of whose labor is more thrilling than any romance, learned this from experience. He said that early in his Christian life he heard the message, "Go to Mongolia," but when he got there he found that he had been mistaken for the message all the time had really been, "Come to Mongolia." Jesus had been there all the time waiting for him. He is always ahead of us, preparing the harvest if we will just see the masses, seize the moment, and share the message.

It was June 6, 1944, one of the most crucial times in world history. The high command of the allied forces under Supreme Commander Dwight David Eisenhower were gathered at Portsmouth, England. They were poised for Operation Overlord, the cross-channeled attack from England to France. It would be D-Day, the invasion of Normandy.

The United States, Great Britain, and Canada had assembled the largest amphibious assault force in history. It involved 3 million men, 5,000 large ships, 4,000 small landing craft, and more than 11,000 aircraft. It was the greatest invasion fleet ever to sail the seas.

If successful it would mark the beginning of the end of World War II. The invasion had been set for June 5, but bad weather had caused the launch to be delayed at least 24 hours. Now, as

General Eisenhower met with his chiefs of staff, all eyes turned to J. M. Stagg, the chief meteorologist of Operation Overlord. General Eisenhower asked, "Mr. Stagg, could you give us an update on the weather?" Mr. Stagg replied, "A fresh weather front provided hope of improved conditions the following day. We will have a corridor of about 36 hours where the ceiling will be 3,000 feet. If we wait beyond that it will be at least a month before the weather will allow us to go."

Ike asked each of his commanders how they thought the forecast would affect the operation. But ultimately, the decision was his. After they spoke Ike sat in silence for thirty, maybe forty seconds. Then he raised his head, looked at his fellow commanders, and said, "The consequences of delay justify great risk. We'll go."

Our decision to go affects more than the outcome of a war in time. It affects the souls of men for eternity. We are sowing and reaping for everlasting life.

How many hours do we have before the ceiling falls? I do not know, but it's getting awfully dark outside. God knows we have had enough time already. The time has come for us to say, "The consequences of delay justify great risk. We'll go."

Building Campaign: Let Us Rise Up and Build

Nehemiah 2:17-18; 4:6

A friend told me of reading these words on a plaque in an old church building in England: "In the year 1653 when all things sacred throughout the land were demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, baronet, built this church, whose singular praise is this, *to have done the best of things in the worst of times.*"

A study of history tells us that those middle years of the seventeenth century in England were, indeed, very trying times for the church. Charles I had been beheaded after a mockery of a trial when rebel soldiers garrisoned the doors of Parliament to keep out witnesses favorable to the king. Injustice was to be found on every side . . . Anglican churches were being closed and Presbyterians were being harassed and persecuted. Yet, in the midst of all of that . . . in the worst of times, Sir Robert did the best of things . . . he built a church!

A church, as you know, is physical monument to the spiritual presence of God. It is a place where God and people meet together. To build a church, then, is to do the best of things regardless of the times.

And, to persons alone, has been left the honor and responsibility of doing that. Edgar A. Guest expresses this beautifully in his poem, "God Builds No Churches."

*God builds no churches by his plan
That labor has been left to man
No spire miraculously rise,*

*No little missions from the skies
Fall on a bleak and barren place
To be a source of strength and grace
The humblest church demands its price,
In human toil and sacrifice.*

*Men call the church the house of God
Toward which toil-stained pilgrims trod
In search of strength and rest and hope
As blindly through life's mists they grope,
And there God dwells, but it is man
Who builds the house and draws the plan,
Pays for the mortar and the stone.
That none need seek for God alone.*

*The humblest spire in mortal kin,
Where God abides, was built by men.
And if the church is still to grow,
It still the light of hope must throw.
Across the valley of despair,
Men still must build God's house of prayer.
God sends no churches from the skies,
Out of our hearts they must arise!*

That is the challenge before us today. It is for us to do that best of things in these times. It is for us to build a church. And, as we think of it, let us focus on the ingredients for success in the building program.

Amazingly, the Bible has much to say about this. There are several entire books in the Bible devoted to the subject of building. And, there are large segments of other books that are devoted to building projects. Obviously, building a house of worship is important to God since he has devoted so much space to it in the Bible.

One of the books devoted to a building campaign is the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a Jewish layman and a high government official in the court of Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. And, he had an intense love for his homeland, Israel, though he

had never been there.

One day a group of Nehemiah's kinsmen came from Judah to Shushan, the winter palace of the king. When Nehemiah inquired of them concerning the condition of the Jews in Jerusalem they gave him a sad report. The small group of Jews in Judah were in great affliction and reproach. The walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates had been burned with fire.

When Nehemiah heard this report he was heart broken. Why was the rebuilding of the walls of the city of Jerusalem so important to Nehemiah? It is because in that day the walls of a city represented the god of the people who inhabited it. A city without walls suggested that the god of that city was weak and defenseless.

Babylon had double walls around it, so wide that two chariots could race about it abreast. And as they did the astonished people saw it and shouted, "Great is the god Marduke."

According to the book of Lamentations, jackals gathered on the rubble of Jerusalem's walls and the ruins of what once had been the glory of Solomon and it was as if they cried out with their crackling howl, "Gone is the glory of the city of David."

As he prayed about the condition of his homeland, Nehemiah became convinced that it was God's will for him to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem. When the time was right, he asked Artaxerxes for a leave of absence to return to Judah and reconstruct the walls of the city of David. The king not only granted his request, he also gave him papers to guarantee his safe passage, a requisition order for the timber he would need for the building, and a military escort.

News of Nehemiah's mission preceded him and before he arrived some of the enemies of the Jews, who inhabited the land, began to criticize the project. They did not want to see the city secure or the people prosper. This was but the beginning of the opposition Nehemiah would encounter throughout the project.

Upon arrival at Jerusalem and under the cover of darkness, Nehemiah surveyed the ruins of the walls and developed a plan

for their reconstruction. He then assembled the leaders of Israel, told them how God had led him and how the king had helped him, and challenged them to join in the rebuilding program. His words galvanized the people to action.

Their response was immediate and enthusiastic. They said, "Let us rise up and build." By the sheer depth of his commitment and the strength of his personality, Nehemiah convinced the people that his project should be theirs . . . and they committed themselves to rebuild the walls.

The enemies of the Jews then unleashed their criticism with new fury. They called his plans absurd and far-fetched. They accused him of disloyalty to the king and building for his own self-interest. They threatened him and even tried to assassinate him. But nothing could stop Nehemiah.

His plan was masterful. He divided the project into small segments and appointed workmen for various parts of the work. Some were to build certain gates; some a section of the wall; some were to build in the south; others were up north of the city. But everyone had a job to do.

As the work progressed, the sidewalk superintendents stepped up their efforts to hinder it. But Nehemiah and his workmen kept praying and kept laboring.

Against unbelievable odds and with a superhuman effort, the work was completed in the short span of 52 days. When ribbon cutting day arrived, it was a day of celebration and consecration. Even the critics had to recognize that this work was wrought by God (Neh. 6:16). The result was that the people rededicated themselves to God and a great spiritual revival swept over the land.

Why was this building program so successful? What were the factors that made it so effective? The single most important ingredient in its success was the spirit of the people. Nehemiah expressed it when he reported, "So built we the walls; and all the walls joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work" (Neh. 4:6).

This statement does not suggest human achievement, but human instrumentality. The people made themselves available

to God and he used them to accomplish the impossible and that which would glorify his name.

That's the spirit we need. That's the resolve we must have. If we, like they, have a mind to work, if in our hearts we can say together, "Let us rise up and build," we can see the same kind of success.

But it will not be easy. It will take faith and commitment, sacrifice and determination. Not everyone will believe we need to do it. There will be opposition. We must be willing to take criticism as well as risks. But, the end result will be the glory of God. It can happen if we, like they, "have a mind to work."

What then are the ingredients to a successful building campaign? Nehemiah's experience gives us the answer: an unfaltering trust in God, an undaunted commitment to the task, and an undivided spirit among the people.

Lord, Help Us!

First, success will require an unfaltering trust in God. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was no grandiose scheme dreamed up by Nehemiah. It had its origin in the heart of God. And it was such a momentous undertaking against such great odds by such a small group of people that it could succeed only if God blessed it. Nehemiah was so confident that God would bless them that he boldly declared to his critics, "The God of heaven, he will prosper us, therefore we his servants will build . . ." (2:20).

Embarking on a building project like ours is always an act of faith. The enormity of the task, the uncertainty of the times, and our limited resources, always drives us to our knees. I think, therefore, the first and perhaps only question we need to consider in this undertaking is, "Is this of God?" The question is not, "Are the times right?" It is not "Is this too big for us?", but rather, "Is this of God?"

George MacDonald, in his work entitled *Robert, the Falconer*, wrote, "This is a sane, wholesome, practical, working faith: first, it is man's business to do the will of God; second, that

God takes on himself the special care of that man; and third, that, therefore, that man ought never to be afraid of anything."

It is the same with us. Johann Sebastian Bach, the composer and church organist who gave the world so much of its great music, wrote at the beginning of almost every manuscript of every new piece of music he composed the initials "J.J." The letters stood for *Jesu Jubet* — Jesus help me. It is in that spirit that we launch into this program. We breathe the prayer, "Lord, help us. If you do we will be successful."

Born-Again and Born-Aginners

Second, success will require an undaunted commitment to the task. Nehemiah faced much opposition. There was ridicule from without and complaints from within. That's understandable. Where there is light, there will be bugs! Wherever and whenever people attempt a great undertaking there will invariably be opposition and criticism. It is to be expected.

Dr. W. A. Criswell tells, in his biography, of the time when he pastored the Devil's Bend Baptist Church. There he found a group of people he called the "ginners," for they opposed everything. The church held its business conference on Saturday afternoon and "the ginners" were always there and seated on the front pew.

One Sunday, a member stood and proposed, "My brothers, I make a motion we build a fence around the cemetery." Another stood and countered, "I'm against it." Then he explained his reasons. "Do you know of anyone in the cemetery that can get out?", he asked. "Do you know of anybody on the outside that wants in? Then why build a fence around the cemetery?"

We respect honest differences. We honor those who have sincere doubts. We want to hear all responsible opposition. But we will not be deterred by those who have no vision and are opposed to all progress.

When I was a pastor in Tyler I received a letter from a young college professor whom I had never met. He had grown up in

our city and had once belonged to our church. He was now teaching at a major university in another state. His letter read:

“Gentlemen, please remove my name from your membership roll if it is still listed. This is not a request for transfer of membership, or letter, but a formal resignation. The modern day church has become nothing but a social club and no longer has anything to do with God. People are starving to death while you build thick-carpeted, air conditioned buildings, and I no longer want my name associated with such a hypocritical organization.”

Sincerely,

When I received the letter I immediately thought about a 16-year-old boy I once met in San Marcos, Texas, where I had a previous pastorate. The boy had run away from home, and his mother had written asking me to find him and talk to him. I received letters like that quite often in the turbulent and rebellious days of the sixties.

I found the young man living in a mobile home. The yard in front of where he lived was a junk heap. It was littered with an old automobile motor, an empty fifty-gallon oil drum, two old automobile tires, and assorted bottles, cans, and boxes.

When the young man came to the door, he looked worse than the yard. His clothes were dirty, his hair stringy, his face unshaven.

Inside I quickly got around to the purpose of my visit. I asked, “What are your dreams for the future? What do you intend to do with your life?”

He replied, “I don’t know. I’ve heard that they’re messing up the Everglades in Florida. I think I’ll go down and help them clean up the mess.”

I said to him, “Fellow, if you want to clean up something, why don’t you start in your own front yard?”

Back to the letter: I wondered if that young Ph.D. lived in a cold-water flat with linoleum on the floor and an oscillating fan by his bed. Surely he would not live in a modern apartment and

complain about air conditioned churches with carpeted aisles. That would be the height of hypocrisy. That would be the pot calling the kettle black.

But, that is precisely the way some people are. As one of my former members put it succinctly, "Some people are born again and some are born-againners." We will not let the born-againners divert us. We have an undaunted commitment to this work.

The Spirit of the Team

Third, success will require an undivided spirit of cooperation. The work of rebuilding the walls was not done by one man, but by many. It was a unified effort. Each tribe had its assignment and each fulfilled it faithfully. They cooperated in the task.

Unity and cooperation must always be the hallmark of God's people. Somebody said, "Coming together is beginning, keeping together is progress, thinking together is unity, and working together is success." Together we can move mountains if each one of us will carry his share of small stones.

There is power in unity. In Leviticus we read, "Five of you shall chase a hundred and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight" (Lev. 26:8). That's the power of togetherness. It indicates a hundred people together become five hundred percent more effective than five people working together.

Edgar A. Guest wrote:

*It's all very well to have courage and skill
And it's fine to be counted a star,
But the single deed with its touch of thrill
Doesn't tell us the man you are;
There is no lone hand in the game we play,
We must work to a bigger scheme,
And the thing that counts in the world today
Is, how do you pull with the team?*

*They may sound your praise and call you great
They may single you out for fame,*

*But you must work with your running-mate
Or you'll never win the game:
For, never the work of life is done
By the man with a selfish dream,
For the battle is lost or the battle is won
By the spirit of the team.*

When the walls were completed, Nehemiah said, "And all the congregation said Amen (so be it) and then praised the Lord." Thank God for the unanimity and harmony there and here. We must never permit this priceless possession to be eroded away. For when people stop pulling together they start falling apart.

Why was the rebuilding of the walls of the city of Jerusalem so important to Nehemiah that he would take a leave of absence from a high government position, travel 800 long and dangerous miles, and endure the personal attacks he suffered in order to accomplish it? Why was it so important to the Lord that he devoted an entire book of the Bible to the project; and outlined in great detail the specific work assignment of those involved? Why was it so important to the people that once it was accomplished a revival broke out among them?

It was because the walls of a city were its defense and its security. They were a credit to the god of that city. They were a witness and a testimony of his power to save and to protect.

So, rebuilding the walls was important because it would glorify God. I mentioned Bach earlier. On his new manuscripts he actually placed two sets of initials. At the beginning he placed "J.J." for "Jesus help me." At the end he placed "S.D.G." — *Soli Deo Gloria* — to God alone be the glory.

There is a sense in which "to God alone be the glory" could be written at the end of Nehemiah's book. And it is in that spirit that we labor also. We undertake and we will complete this building for his glory.

A building program that does not glorify God and lead his people to a closer walk with him, does not deepen their commitment to him, is not accomplishing its true purpose. Our purpose is not just to raise money, it is to raise an edifice to the

glory of God. And to raise the spiritual level of our people.

On the day before he was killed, president John F. Kennedy spoke to a group of space scientists in Texas about his dreams. He recalled the Irish writer, Frank O'Connor, who had told how, as a boy, he and his friend would wander across the countryside and when they came to an orchard wall that was too high to climb, they would throw their hats over the wall, then they would have no choice but to follow.

"The U.S. has tossed its cap over the wall," Kennedy said, showing that his own broad streak of adventure was a part of his great charm. "Now we will climb this wall," he said, and "we shall then explore the wonders of the other side."

Friends, that's what we are about to do. We shall enthusiastically throw our hats over the wall, and then by the grace of God we shall climb it for his glory and honor.

Senior Adult Day: Growing Older Without Getting Old

Josh. 14:11-12

I heard some startling news recently: senior adults are the largest carriers of AIDS in America . . . Roloids! Band-Aids! And hearing aids!

Someone told me about an 85-year-old woman who had a date with a 90-year-old man. She lived with her daughter, and when she didn't come in on time, they began to worry. They imagined all kinds of things that might have happened to them. When she finally arrived home an hour late, her daughter asked, "How did things go?" The mother replied, "We went to the movies and I had to slap him three times." The daughter was astonished. She asked, "Because he got fresh with you?" The mother replied, "No, to see if he was alive."

I have an aunt who married so late in life that Medicare picked up 80 percent of the cost of her honeymoon.

Last year I met one of our annuitants in Arkansas who was 101 years old. On his 100th birthday he preached a sermon. I asked him, "How do you live to be 100?" He replied, "You get to be 99 and then you're V-E-R-Y careful."

We make a lot of jokes about getting old, but Buckner Fanning gave the best advice on aging when he said, "Forget your age, live your life." That's my challenge to you today.

There are a lot of older people who have done that successfully. One of them is George Burns. When he was 96 years of

age the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas tried to sign him to a 10-year contract. He chose a five-year contract instead, saying to the hotel, "You may not be around that long. We'll sign a five-year contract and renegotiate in five years."

Then Burns said something we need to remember, "You can't help getting older, but you don't have to get old." Growing older is a matter of age. It happens with the passing of years. But getting old is a matter of attitude.

Sir Winston Churchill said old age could conquer his body, but not his spirit. The years, he said, could wrinkle his skin, but not wrinkle his soul.

It is so with all of us. You're as young as your faith; as old as your doubts; as young as your confidence; as old as your fears; as young as your hopes; as old as your despair.

Caleb, one of the heroes of the Old Testament, is a good example of a person growing older without getting old. He maintained a buoyant optimism all of his life. At the age of 85 he was still growing, going, and glowing. He found life too exciting and challenging to retire from it.

Israel, under the leadership of Joshua, came to the border of the Promised Land with the intent of taking it. Standing squarely in their path was the city of Hebron, a great walled city, perched on the side of a mountain and inhabited by the people of Anakim, giants nine-feet tall. The city had to be taken if the conquest of the land was to be complete. So Caleb, now 85 years old, said to Joshua, "Now, therefore, give me this mountain . . . and if so be the Lord will be with me, then I shall be able to drive them out" (Josh. 14:12).

This was the second time the children of Israel had come to this place. The first was under the leadership of Moses 40 years earlier. Eighteen months out of Egypt the children of Israel had come to the borders of the Promised Land and the Lord had commanded them to take it. But instead they appointed a "Promised Land Search Committee."

The committee searched out the land for 40 days and returned with a divided report. Two said, "Go," and ten said, "No."

The majority may rule, but the majority is not always right. And, they were dead wrong in this instance. The majority said there were walled cities in the land and they were occupied by giants. They said, "In our own sight we were as grasshoppers." When they gave that kind of report the hearts of the people melted. Their fears were greater than their faith. The giants looked bigger than God. The obstacles outweighed the opportunities.

Negative thinking and fear are communicable diseases. So the people rebelled against Moses and turned back into the wilderness, where they wandered for 40 years . . . until that entire generation, save Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who wanted to take the land, all had died.

It has been estimated that during that 40 years Israel wandered over 700 miles in the Sinai peninsula. That calculates to about 20 miles per year, or 100 yards per day . . . that's faster than some churches move today, and for the same reason.

Now it is 40 years later, and this time under the leadership of Joshua, the children of Israel are back to the borders of the Promised Land. As they prepare to divide the land and conquer it, Caleb recounts with clarity and exactness the events of 40 years earlier. He reminds Joshua he had gone out as a spy and had been one of the two who came back with a positive recommendation. Then he reminds Joshua that God, through Moses, had promised to give him a good portion of the land as an inheritance. And, the Lord had kept him alive and healthy over the last years so that he might fulfill that promise.

Then he spoke those challenging words, "And yet I am as strong this day as I was in the day that Moses sent me: as my strength was then, even so is my strength now, for war, both to go out, and to come in. Now, therefore, give me this mountain, wherefore the Lord spake in that day; for thou heardest in that day how the Anakims were there, and the cities were great and fenced: if so be the Lord will be with me, then I shall be able to drive them out, as the Lord said" (Josh. 14:11-12).

Forty years in the wilderness had not dimmed his vision, daunted his faith, destroyed his enthusiasm, nor diminished his trust in God. He wanted to keep going and growing for the Lord. Caleb had grown older without getting old.

God help us all to give a good account of the latter years of our life. May he help us all to find life too exciting and too challenging during our later years that we won't want to retire from it.

How is it possible for us to have the spirit of Caleb? How can we grow older without growing old? I offer four suggestions.

Shape Up!

First, if you want to grow older without getting old, you need to keep your body physically fit. There are physical changes that come with age. Some affect our vanity and some affect our vitality. Well-known are the "five B's" of aging — baldness, bridges, bulges, bunions, and bifocals. As someone has said, "Time is a great healer, but a lousy beautician."

And some affect our vitality. A man who says he can do as much at 60 as he did at 20 wasn't doing much at 20. But keeping yourself physically fit does help.

Taking care of your body may not have been as important at the turn of the century when life expectancy in America was only 47 years. But today the average American can expect to live to the age of 75.3 years. And, in time, through advances in modern medical science and improved living conditions, people will probably live to be 120 years old. Biologists have observed that animals generally live six times the period of time it takes them to reach maturity. If it takes humans 20 years to reach maturity and they live six times that long, the average age could well be 120 years.

All of this makes taking care of our body even more imperative. Because our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and because our bodies are a means through which our Lord expresses his personality and does his work, we ought to keep them healthy, strong, and attractive so we can serve him as

long and as effectively as possible.

Dr. Walter Bortz, in his book *We Live Too Short and Die Too Long*, gives us some keys to aging successfully. He offers these tips:

- Exercise at least 30 minutes straight three times weekly.
- Eat like a bushman — fruits, whole grains, vegetables, lean meats.
- Get enough sleep.
- Deflect anger and keep a sense of humor.
- Set goals and accept challenges.
- Don't depend on anyone but you for your well-being.
- Be necessary. If you become useless you should die.
- Don't slow down.

Dr. Bortz says, "Most of what we thought as aging isn't aging at all. It's disuse — of muscles, brains, arteries, bones."

At the age of 85 Caleb could say, "I am as strong this day as I was the day Moses sent me" (40 years earlier). He had obviously kept his body strong and healthy so he could serve the Lord as long as he lived.

I challenge you to do the same. Start activating your life today and never quit. Dr. Eric Pfeiffer, a physicist at Duke University, says that those who live longest are those who refuse to give in. They take old age in stride. They watch what they eat. They take long walks. They keep busy. "The decision to have an active life is really an important decision," Dr. Pfeiffer says. "It's a yea-saying to life."

It's Never Too Late

Second, if you want to grow older without getting old, you must keep your mind alert. Gray hair doesn't have to mean fuzzy thinking. We do lose some brain cells with age. But neuroscientists now know we grow more connecting branches between brain cells — increasing our depth of knowledge — through our seventies, if we live a stimulating life.

According to Dr. George Lawton, “Your mind is still young at 50: your brain doesn’t reach its zenith until 10 years after that. And from 60 on, mental efficiency declines very slowly to the age of 80. At 80 you can be just as productive mentally as you were at 30 — and you should know a lot more.

These latter years can be the most productive years of your life. An evidence of this is the fact that some of the greatest contributions made to society have been made by people considered senior citizens.

Michaelangelo completed his greatest work, the dome of St. Peter’s, at the age of 87.

Tennyson was 83 when he wrote “Crossing the Bar.”

Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes handed down some of his most brilliant legal opinions at the age of 90.

Winston Churchill wrote his four-volume work, “The History of English-speaking People,” when he was 82.

Golda Meir became prime minister of Israel at the age of 71.

Benjamin Franklin, at the age of 81, helped frame the U.S. Constitution.

William Gladstone made some of his greatest speeches in Parliament when he was 84 years old.

George Bernard Shaw won the Nobel Prize when he was 69.

George Burns won an Academy Award for his performance in “The Sunshine Boys” at the age of 80.

Jessica Tandy was 80 when she won her first Oscar for “Driving Miss Daisy.”

Moses was 80 years old when he led the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage.

The apostle John was 90 when he wrote “The Revelation.”

And, recently, I met a man who was ordained as a new deacon at the age of 90. Isn’t that amazing? The Bible says a deacon should be “grave.” At 90 years of age, I’d say a man is about as near to the grave as he can be without being in it.

All these people grew older without getting old. And, they did it, in part, because they kept their mind alert.

So did Caleb. He was able to recall with exactness the events that had transpired and the promises of God made years before.

Perhaps the most important fact to remember about the learning process is "it should never end!" No matter what your age, you never learn all that you can learn. You never develop your brain as much as it can be developed. No matter how old, no matter how smart, there's always room for improvement.

If you continue reading, thinking, and creating all of your life, the knowledge you gain will improve your intelligence. The speed of reasoning and remembering may decrease, but not the quality.

A Time for Fine Tuning

Third, if you want to grow older without getting old, you should keep your faith focused. Faith is one of the essential ingredients of life. Every time we drive in the rain, fly a plane, buy or sell on credit, make a date, get married, or eat in a restaurant, we exercise faith. We go to doctors we don't know. They give us prescriptions we can't read. We take it to a pharmacist we may never see, and he gives us medication about which we know nothing. We then take it — by faith.

How could you live one single day without faith? Live one day without believing your wife or your children or your husband. Live one day without writing a check or trusting your insurance policies. Live one day without believing what your associates tell you. Live one day without trusting your physician. Live one day apart from faith? Why, it's an utter impossibility!

The difference among people is not that some have faith and others do not. Everybody has faith, even the atheist. The difference is the focus point of our faith. Some focus on themselves — their wisdom, influence, and gifts. Our faith is in the Lord. As the motto on our coins says, "In God We Trust." When our faith is planted in God then we have faith in ourselves

and faith in tomorrow.

Caleb told Joshua he would take the mountain, "if so be the Lord is with me." He was under no illusions about his own ability. His faith was focused on the Lord. His confidence was in him.

As we grow older we should fine-tune our faith. A young boy and an old man were sitting on a dock in the late afternoon, fishing. They had talked about many things . . . why sunsets are red, why rain falls, why the seasons change, what life is like. Finally the boy looked at the old man, as the old man was baiting his hook for him, and asked, "Does anybody ever see God?"

"Son," said the man, looking across the blue water, "it's getting so that I hardly see anything else."

Our latter years are times to fix our eyes on the Lord and to pray the ancient prayer of Richard of Chichester: "Help us to see thee more clearly, help us to love thee more dearly, help us to follow thee more nearly."

Nothing Half-Hearted

Fourth, if you want to grow older without getting old you must keep your heart yielded. Caleb reminded Joshua that he had "wholly followed the Lord." He had not been half-hearted in anything he had done. He had laid his life and reputation on the line 40 years earlier and he had not deviated from that commitment.

Dreams and dedication are a powerful combination. Caleb, though he had grown older, had lost neither. He held on to the dreams of his youth and he maintained his dedication in his old age.

We are living in a day of spiritual ambivalence. Sidney Lanier, the 19th century American poet and critic, captured the mood of our time when he wrote:

We live in an age of half faith and half doubt;
Standing at the temple doors head in, heart out.

To those who are tempted to half-hearted devotion, there is a well-known biblical verse that ought to shake us up: "You must love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). The scriptures ask us to love God totally, completely, with our whole being. Moderation is not enough.

In the days of the Stewarts in England, the Marquis of Huntly was captured by the enemy. His captors told him to abandon his loyalty to the king. They then pointed at a block and an ax and told him that unless he did so he would be executed then and there. His answer was, "You can take my head from my shoulders, but you will never take my heart from my king." In a day of half-hearted devotion that's the kind of loyalty the Lord wants from us.

The senior years of life are not a time to drop out, back down, let up, or slack off. The call to commitment has no age limit or expiration date. As long as we live and breathe we ought to give our highest and best to him.

The secret of the Christian life is not to try harder, but to surrender more. That's what Caleb did. That's what we should do.

It's a simple fact that commitment to the Lord Jesus gives meaning, excitement, and purpose to our lives that enables us to grow older without getting old.

A very old man, when he lay dying, said, "I have found that all the sugar is at the bottom of the cup." Life can grow sweeter and more rewarding as we grow older if we possess the presence of Christ. The hymn writer was right, "The Longer I Serve Him, the Sweeter It Grows." There can be no depression and no loneliness if Christ is centered in your life. Sunsets are always glorious. It is Christ who adds the color, glory, and beauty of your sunsets.

Robert Browning, in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, expressed it beautifully:

*"Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be
The last of life for which the
First was made.*

*Our times are in his hands,
Who said,
'A whole I planned, youth
Sees but half; trust God;
See all; be not afraid.'"*

Revival Preparation: The Revival We Need

Psalm 85:6

The greatest need of the church today is not more members, more money, or more buildings. It is not even more missions and evangelism. It is repentance and revival.

Church membership, Christian stewardship, and building construction are all up. But, so is crime, divorce, illegitimacy, alcoholism, and drug abuse. When church activities are at an all-time high, but the morals of the country are at an all-time low, there is something wrong.

The need for revival is evident everywhere in the church. It can be seen in the low level of living by many church members today. Lowell Thomas, the famous news commentator, said that early in his life, during the gold rush days, his father moved their family to the mining town of Cripple Creek, Colorado. He wrote, "In this wide open atmosphere, I soon felt right at home with sin." The church today is like that. It has settled down and is at home with sin. As someone said, "The church today is like Noah's ark. If it weren't for the storm on the outside we couldn't stand the stench on the inside."

The need for revival can be seen in our complacency. Most churches are half empty and fully satisfied. At least sixty-two percent of the churches in my denomination have either plateaued or are in decline and few people seem concerned. Most of our members seem content just to sit and soak and sour until the second coming.

The need for revival can be seen in the unrest of our

churches. In a recent eighteen month period 2,100 ministers in my denomination were terminated. There are 38,000 churches in our convention. That means one in eighteen pastors was terminated in eighteen months. When you add to those who have been thrown out, those who are washed out, burned out, or found out, our churches are in turmoil.

One friend said to me, "Most of my meetings (revivals) are rescue meetings. I go to straighten out the mess in the church so the pastor can stay or to get well enough acquainted with him to recommend him somewhere else."

The need for revival can also be seen in our lack of commitment. People today have more leisure time than any other generation that has ever lived. Yet, it is increasingly more difficult to get people to make a commitment to teach, sing in the choir, serve through the church. They say, "I don't want to be tied down." When people are unwilling to be tied down for the one who was nailed down for them, there is something wrong with our level of commitment.

And finally, the need for revival can be seen in the dullness of most church activities. Religion is either an acute fever or a dull monotony. For far too many it is a dull monotony. We are like the children of Israel in Malachi's day who sat in the house of God and said, "O, what a weariness it is" (Mal. 1:13). That attitude is probably what led Nietzsche to say, "If you want me to believe in your redeemer you'll have to look more redeemed." And when that is true, revival is needed.

The need of both the church and society is apparent. We must have revival for survival. It is Pentecost or holocaust.

What is revival? The word "revival" comes from two Latin words: *re*, which means "again", and *vivo*, which means "to live." The literal meaning is "to live again."

Revival is not the conversion of an old rascal, the town reprobate, some celebrity, or a star athlete. That's evangelism. Revival is the stirring of God's people to new life, to new dedication, new effort, and new concern. It is a coming back to God, a renewal of what ought to be first in our lives. It is a return to our first love. Evangelism is bringing the lost to new life.

Revival is bringing the church to new life.

Charles Finney said, "Revival is nothing but a new beginning of obedience to God." R. A. Torrey said, "Revival is furnishing someone for the Holy Spirit to work through." And, D. M. Panton said, "Revival is the in-rush of the spirit into a body that threatens to become a corpse."

The kind of revival we need was described by the psalmist when he said, "Wilt thou not revive us again that thy people may rejoice in thee" (Ps. 85:6).

The occasion for these words was Israel's return from Babylonian captivity. They had been exiled because of their sin. It was God's chastening for not obeying him and not serving him. Now, as they returned home after seventy years, the land was desolate and the people discouraged. As the psalmist remembers their former days of glory and grace, he cries out to God for mercy and restoration.

Behind this prayer for revival by the psalmist are three implications: first, that we were once right with God; second, we aren't now; third, we can be again. In his prayer, the psalmist expresses the kind of revival we need. What kind is it? It is a heaven sent, a church centered, a God honoring revival.

Worked Up or Prayed Down

First, we need a heaven sent revival. This verse is a prayer. The writer is asking God to do something only he could do. He asked, *Wilt thou* revive us again?

There has long been a difference of opinion over where revival comes from. Charles G. Finney said revivals are the work of men. They are worked up. So he emphasized promotion along with prayer as a part of revival preparation.

But, Matthew Henry said, "When God intends great mercy for his people, the first thing he does is set them praying." He believed prayer was the main secret of revival.

And Charles Haddon Spurgeon affirms, "Christian men should never speak of getting up a revival! Where are you going

to get it up from? I do not know any place which you can get it up except the place which is better to have no connection with. We must inquire of the Lord to do it for us. Too often the temptation is to inquire of an imminent evangelist, or ask whether a great preacher could be induced to come. Now, I do not object to inviting soul winning preachers, or to try any other plan of usefulness; but our main business is to inquire of the Lord. For after all, he alone can give the increase." (Eric W. Hayden, *Spurgeon on Revival*, pages 72-73).

Well, which is it? Are revivals prayed down or worked up?

The relationship between the two can best be seen in the great revival under Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 King 18). Israel had forsaken God and gone after Baal. Elijah assembled Israel on Mount Carmel to call them back to God. He challenged the prophets of Baal to prove whether Baal or Jehovah was the god of Israel. The prophets of Baal called on their god to demonstrate his power, but he failed miserably. Elijah then built an altar, piled it high with wood, dug a trench around it, and soaked it with water. He poured water on it until the water ran down the altar and filled the trench surrounding it. He then prayed this simple prayer, "Lord, let it be known this day that thou art the God of Israel." Then, fire fell from heaven and all of Israel declared, "The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God."

There would have been no need for Elijah to pray unless he first stacked the wood, for there would have been nothing to burn. And, there would have been no need to stack the wood unless he prayed, for there would have been nothing to ignite it.

It is the same with revival. To have revival we must work as though everything depends on us and pray as though everything depends on God.

The song writer put it this way:

*"Brethren we have met to worship
And adore the Lord, our God
Will you pray with all your power
While we try to preach the Word.*

*All is vain unless the Spirit
Of the holy One comes down.
Brethren pray and holy manna
Will be showered all around."*

Preaching and praying — that's it! It takes them both. The revival we need is a heaven sent revival.

Breaking In or Breaking Out

Second, we need a church centered revival. The psalmist prays, "Wilt thou not revive us . . ." Who is the "us" he is talking about? He tells us in the next sentence, ". . . that thy people may rejoice in thee." His words remind us of 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins, and will heal their land."

Revival must start within the church. It does not start outside and break in. It starts inside and breaks out. Revival can never lay hold upon the world until it has first laid hold on the church.

In the Old Testament God wanted to save the city of Nineveh and called Jonah to preach repentance and salvation to them. But, Jonah had no love for Nineveh and refused to go. Instead he caught a ship for Tarsus, which was in the opposite direction. God sent a great storm, Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish. In the belly of the fish Jonah repented and agreed to go to Nineveh to preach. When he did, revival came and the whole city was saved.

The greatest obstacle to the conversion of Nineveh was not to be found in Nineveh. It was not the sinfulness of the Ninevites, although that was great. It was not the corruption of the politicians or the brutality of the police. It was not in the prevalence of cults. The biggest obstacle to the salvation of Nineveh was Jonah. When Jonah repented of his disobedience, prejudice and indifference, revival came.

Jonah was the key to the salvation of Nineveh and God's

people are the key to the spiritual condition of our nation and world. Revival must start with you and me.

Since a revival can never lay hold upon the world until it first lays hold upon the church, the need is for the fountain of sin to be broken up in the church. Back-slidden Christians must be brought to repentance. They must have their faith renewed. We are to pray for that.

The question is, "Do we really want revival badly enough to seek God's face, to pay the price, to pray and prepare the way for God's coming in revival?" No one can predict revival. No one can program revival. No one can earn revival. We cannot generate revival by faithfulness, busyness, or spiritual activities. God is the only source of revival.

Gypsy Smith was once asked how to start a revival. He answered, "Go home, lock yourself in your room, kneel down in the middle of your floor, draw a chalk mark all around yourself, and ask God to start the revival inside that chalk mark. When he has answered your prayer, the revival will be on."

R. A. Torrey said, "I can give you a prescription that will bring revival to any church or community or city on earth. First, let a few Christians (they need not be many) get thoroughly right with God themselves. This is the prime essential. If this is not done, the rest that I am to say will come to nothing. Second, let them bind themselves together in a prayer group to pray for a revival until God opens the heavens and comes down. Third, let them put themselves at the disposal of God for him to use them as he sees fit in winning others to Christ. That is all! This is sure to bring revival to any church or community. I have given this prescription around the world. It has been taken by many churches and many communities, and in no instance has it ever failed; and it cannot fail!"

Charles G. Finney said, "To have a revival, take a piece of paper (no matter how long) and record all your sins. Make a clean sweep — record things like pride, envy, temper, grumbling, neglect, robbing God, unthankfulness. Then confess all these to God and believe him."

There are three things that always characterize spiritual

renewal. First, there is a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. People sense there is a mighty need and a hunger for renewal and revival. If you are satisfied with your life and the church as it is, forget revival. It will never come. Revival always begins with a deep dissatisfaction.

Second, there is a personal soul searching, confession, and repentance of sin. Personal holiness is always a major ingredient in true revival.

Third, there is a mighty commitment to prayer. People forego meals for prayer. They lay aside entertainment, shopping, meetings, and other things from time to time as the spirit of God calls them to prayer.

Someone once said, we could have revival in the church if . . .

. . . all the disobedient folks would straighten up,
. . . all the gossipers would shut up,
. . . all the lukewarm folks would fire up,
. . . all the sleeping folks would wake up,
. . . all the depressed folks would look up,
. . . all the dishonest folks would 'fess up,
. . . all the discouraged folks would cheer up,
. . . all the disgruntled folks would sweeten up,
. . . all the soldiers of Christ would stand up,
. . . all the church members would pray up!

We, then, must come to grips with sin in our own life if revival is to come.

A great revival in Scotland and Wales years ago began in a seminary. A preacher said in chapel, "God can mightily use any man whom he can bend to his will." Evans Roberts heard him, fell on his knees and prayed, "Oh, God, bend me." And revival came. The nation was changed all because one man said, "Oh, God, bend me." Are you willing to pray, "Oh, God, bend me."

Revival must begin with us or it will never begin. I believe that! The revival we need is church centered.

Something or Someone

Third, we need a God honoring revival. The prayer of the psalmist was, “Revive us again that thy people may rejoice in thee.” Churches sometimes seek revival as if they were seeking some thing rather than some one. They seek revival in order to see the sensational or to bolster sagging statistics. They take a revival emphasis and turn it into “big business” and it becomes an end in itself.

Some people seek revival like they seek God’s will, as though it were separate and apart from God Himself. My advice to people who want to know God’s will is always the same, “Don’t seek God’s will. Seek God himself. And, when you find him he will reveal his will to you.” It is the same with revival. We do not need to seek revival, we need to seek God. When we find him, that will be revival.

And, when revival comes there will be new joy in the church. There is pleasure in sin. There is no doubt about that. Sin has a kick but it also has a kick-back. But real joy, lasting joy, is to be found in God.

The psalmist declared, “In thy presence is fullness of joy. At thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Ps. 16:11). Joy is the birthright of every believer and should be the hallmark of every church. Paul wrote, “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink (rules and regulations); but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17). If you are going to church more and enjoying it less, you need revival.

If the joy, the excitement, the enthusiasm that you had when you first met Christ has been lost, you need to pray the prayer of David, “Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation” (Ps. 51:12).

Revival can begin now, and it can begin with you. If you aren’t as close to God as you once were, don’t make a mistake about which one has moved. When you come back to him, that will be revival. And that will be a cause for rejoicing.

Stewardship: Robbing God

Malachi 3:8-10

Following three church robberies in one day, a Fort Worth deputy chief of police lamented, "The church was once the most sacred place in town. It was a place of safety and security. But now it has become the target of thieves. When criminals have the audacity to rob God's people, we are in terrible times."

The house of God is no stranger to thieves. Long ago, the prophet Malachi accused Israel of robbing God by abandoning the practice of tithing (Mal. 3:8).

The book of Malachi is one of the most unique books in scripture. It consists of a series of indictments, six in all, leveled at the people of God for failing to live as the Lord had prescribed.

The pattern of the prophet was to make an accusation against Israel for their sin. The people respond with a plea of innocence. The prophet then, like a prosecuting attorney, presents the evidence to back up his indictment.

In this instance Malachi begins with the indictment that the people have robbed God. The people responded by asking, "In what way have we done this? How have we robbed God?" They have robbed God, Malachi explains, by not tithing.

The word "tithe" means "a tenth part." From the earliest pages of scripture the tithe had been the standard of giving for God's people. Beginning with Abraham and continuing until today God has commanded his people to return "a tenth part" of their possessions to him.

Because the people have not done this, Malachi then points out, "You are cursed with a curse." The nation of Israel was

going through a time of economic crisis. Droughts had ruined their crops and disease had crippled their flocks. The prophet links their economic difficulties to their failure to follow God's prescribed plan in giving.

He then commands, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

The word "all" is emphatic in the Hebrew. It means the "whole" tithe. Obviously, Israel had not quit giving to God altogether, but they were not giving as they should. They were tipping rather than tithing. They were giving something, but they were not bringing their whole tithe to him. They were holding some of it back.

As he challenges them to begin giving correctly Malachi gives them both a reason and a promise. The reason they should tithe is "that there may be meat (for sacrifice) in mine house", i.e., that the worship and work of God might have sufficient resources.

The promise was, "I will open the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

What an indictment! To not tithe is to rob God. It is a crime against the Almighty. Malachi tells us if we do not tithe we rob God, we rob the church, and we rob ourselves.

When we don't tithe we rob God of that which is rightfully his; we rob the church of that which it needs to carry on its mission and ministry; and we rob ourselves of the blessings God wants to bestow upon us.

We Rob God

First, when we don't tithe, we rob God. When the prophet accuses the people of robbing God they respond by saying, "In what way have we robbed God?" The word "rob" literally means "to take by force." They had never taken anything from

God by force. So they wanted to know how they could have robbed him.

You may wonder the same thing. Let me answer in the words of the ancient Jewish sages who pictured Khora trying to discredit Moses by mocking his teachings. "You have taught us," Khora agreed, "'Do not rob the poor for he is poor'" (Prov. 22:22). "Ridiculous! How can one possibly rob the poor? Since he is poor there is nothing to rob from him."

Moses replied, "The charity you should give to the poor belongs to him. When you fail to give it to him, you are robbing him!"

A subtle, sensitive truth speaks to us here. Robbing does not always involve taking from another by force; sometimes we rob by failing to give what belongs to us. We impoverish others by the gifts we withhold from them, by the support we deny them.

The scriptures are clear, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." So basic is this teaching that it is repeated, almost verbatim, five times in scripture — three times in the Old Testament and two in the New (Ex. 9:29; Deut. 10:14; Ps. 24:1; 1 Cor. 10:26,28).

Bishop Edwin Hughes drove this truth home in a sermon one Sunday. Following the worship service he was invited to the home of one of his wealthy parishioners for lunch. After they had dined the host suggested they take a walk. They strolled through the man's beautiful garden, they looked across his fertile fields ripe with grain, they admired his fine cattle. Then as they stood before his huge barns, the man said to him, "Now, Bishop, do you mean to tell me these things do not belong to me?" The Bishop replied, "Sir, ask me that question a hundred years from now."

Time will tell who the real owner is. The apostle Paul said, "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." At best, we are stewards, trustees, business managers of God's world. And, he has commanded us to return to him a tenth part of all that we have.

Once we see God as owner and ourselves as trustees it makes it easier to give back to him the tithe. We believe the inventor

has a right to the fruit of his genius. We believe the investor is entitled to a fair return on his investment. We believe the laborer is worthy of his hire. Surely then, we believe God, the creator and sustainer of all things, has a claim on a tenth part of our possessions.

R. G. LeTourneau was a successful Christian businessman. Early in his career he made a pledge to God that he would give at least 90 percent of his income to God's work if God blessed him. For 33 years he faithfully followed this practice. He explained his amazing stewardship once by saying, "It is not a question how much of my money I'm going to give to God, it is rather how much of God's money I'm going to keep for myself."

Solomon expressed what should be our attitude when he wrote, "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? For all things come from thee, and of thine own have we given thee" (1 Chron. 29:14).

It all belongs to him. When we do not return a tenth part to him we have robbed God of that which is rightfully his.

We Rob the Church

Second, when we do not tithe, we rob the church. The command to Israel was to bring their tithes into the storehouse "that there may be meat (for sacrifices) in mine house." The Bible clearly teaches storehouse tithing. What is the storehouse? It is God's house. It is the church. The church is a heavenly institution with an earthly ministry. It takes money to maintain that ministry. Tithing is God's way to finance his work. So when we do not tithe we rob the church of that which it needs to carry on its mission and ministry.

There are other organizations, other causes we may support, we may contribute to, but the tithe is to go to God's house so his work and worship may go on. We are to bring "all" the tithe into the storehouse. The word "all" is emphatic in the Hebrew. It means the whole tithe.

If we ever see the church for what it is, if we ever catch a vision of the greatness of the church, of its place in the heart of God and its mission in the world, we will want to give a tithe to it.

Booker T. Washington, the great black educator, called on Andrew Carnegie, the philanthropist, to ask for contributions for his educational work. After Washington had made his plea, Mr. Carnegie pulled out his checkbook, and wrote out a check for one thousand dollars.

When Booker T. Washington saw the check he said, "Oh, sir, I have failed to impress you with the bigness of my cause. May I come back again?"

Mr. Carnegie said, "Well, why don't you just keep talking." So, the great man talked on. With greater intensity, he pressed the issue of black education to the heart of this philanthropist. So impressed was Andrew Carnegie that he tore up his first check and wrote another for fifty thousand dollars.

He had caught a vision of what the black man was trying to do for his people and the world. And when he saw the bigness of the cause he wanted to put more into it.

Have you caught a vision of the greatness of our cause? The work of God, the work of the church, is big business, the biggest business in the world.

It is likely that it was in the church you first heard the gospel. It was in the church that you grew in grace. It was in the church that you were baptized. It was probably in the church that you were married. It was in the church that your child was dedicated and in all probability, it is in the church that your funeral service will be held. Surely then, the church is worthy of your highest and your best.

Roger Babson, at one time America's foremost statistical expert and advisor on financial affairs, said, "Sometimes I think of Trinity Church at the end of Wall Street, New York City, as an exchange like the stock exchange at the corner of Wall and Broad Streets. In Trinity Church I can exchange my fears for courage; my worries for faith; my nervousness for patience; and my selfishness for justice, kindness, and the things which really

count. Trinity Church is an exchange for the eternal things of life such as wisdom, serenity, kindness, justice, and beauty, while the stock exchange deals only with the fleeting and temporal things, such as stocks, bonds, money, and materialism."

Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church . . ." Paul said, "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it." If our Lord gave himself for the church we ought to give our tithes to the church. If the church was so important to him, it must be important to us.

Tithing is God's way to finance his work. And if every Christian gave as God has blessed them, if they gave a tithe, the preacher would never need to ask for money again.

We Rob Ourselves

Third, when we do not tithe, we rob ourselves. Knowing our skeptical nature, Malachi closes his teaching with an invitation for us to put God to the test. He says, "Prove me now herewith saith the Lord of hosts, and see if I will not open the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing there shall not be room enough to receive it." He clearly promises his blessings on those who honor and obey him with their lives.

There are so many radio and television preachers proclaiming the "health and wealth" theology today that I am almost hesitant to make this emphasis. But, God makes it and I have no choice. He tells us if we will honor him he will "open the windows of heaven" and pour out blessings on our lives.

I am not suggesting that you tithe so God will bless you. No! You should tithe because it is right. And the blessing comes because we do right. I do not know how God will bless us. It may or may not be with more money. I only know that he promises to do so. And, the ways he can do that are innumerable.

It was said that when Marconi discovered the principal of wireless telegraphy it aroused the scientific curiosity of the world. Some held that the mysterious electric current passed

through the air, while others held that they passed through the earth. Marconi, the discoverer, would not commit himself to either theory. He simply pointed to his marvelous, mysterious invention and said, "Gentlemen, it works."

So it is with tithing. Why and how the blessings of God are upon those who honor him, we may not completely understand, but that they are upon him, we know to be a fact. Honor God, we are blessed; rob God, and a curse is upon us.

This is not only the testimony of scripture, it's the testimony of some of God's best people.

R. G. LeTourneau, whom I mentioned before, said, "The more of my time and the more of my money I invest in the kingdom of God, the more God blesses my business."

Mary Crowley, who founded Home Interiors, Inc., was a devout Christian who used her wealth as well as her talents to extend the kingdom of God and help others. At one time she had very little materially. She did not even have an automobile. She and her two children walked faithfully every Sunday to the services at the First Baptist Church of Dallas. Members of the congregation often picked them up and gave them a ride to church when they encountered them along the way. All the while, in those years, she faithfully tithed her meager income to the Lord.

In time, her home decorating talents and business mind resulted in exceeding wealth. When prosperity came she continued her faithful stewardship. She wore around her neck two small gold shovels. One was larger than the other. When people inquired about their meaning she would answer, "The little shovel is mine. I can shovel it out. The big one is God's. He shovels it in ten times faster."

God's blessings may not always come in the form of material prosperity. But I know this, you can't out give God. He has a bigger scoop than you.

Gladstone, in writing to his son on tithing, said, "No one can tell the richness of the blessings which come to those who thus honor the Lord with their substance."

I know this, you can rob yourself. In fact, we are more likely

to rob ourselves than we are to be robbed by another. The hand that closes the window of heaven against us is most often our hand, not God's. It is said that Judas did not sell Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, but he sold himself. It was his hand that closed the door of a marvelous opportunity, not the hand of Jesus. If we fail to receive the overflowing blessings, it will be our fault.

As someone said, "If we were all tried for the crimes we have committed against ourselves, none of us would escape the gallows."

Arthur Berry was one of the most famous jewel thieves of all times. It is estimated that in his years of crime he committed as many as 150 burglaries and stole jewels valued at between five and ten million dollars.

He seldom robbed from anyone who was not listed in the Social Register. He often did his work in a tuxedo. And, on an occasion or two, when he was interrupted in the act of a crime by a victim, he was able to charm his way out of being reported or turned over to the police.

Like most people who engage in a life of crime he was eventually caught, convicted, and served 25 years in prison for his crimes. Following his release from prison he worked as a counterman in a roadside restaurant on the east coast for 50 dollars a week.

A newspaper reporter found him and interviewed him about his life. After telling about the thrilling episodes of his life he came to the conclusion of the interview to say, "I am not good at morals. But, early in my life I was intelligent and clever, and got along well with people. I think I could have made something of life. But, I didn't. So, when you write the story of my life, when you tell people about all the burglaries, don't leave the big one out. Don't just tell them I robbed Jesse Livermore, the Wall Street baron, or the cousin of the king of England. You tell them Arthur Berry robbed Arthur Berry."

This is the tragic story of many a person's life. We shut the windows of heaven on ourselves. Don't rob God! Don't rob the church! Don't rob yourself! Get in on God's plan. Give him your life, your heart, and your pocketbook. Give freely and joyfully,

and he will bless you.

But, someone will say, "All of this is from the Old Testament. Tithing is an Old Testament teaching. We live under grace, not under law." That is correct, but I remind you that Jesus said, "I came not to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them." Later, after condemning the Pharisees for their meticulous tithing while neglecting ethical matters like justice, mercy, and faith in their daily affairs, he said, "These ye ought to have done, and not left the other, i.e., tithing, undone." The use of the word "ought" implies a moral responsibility. I agree with R. G. Lee who said, "To give less under grace than we give under law is a disgrace." Christians are not looking for the minimum. They are looking for the maximum. Tithing is the floor, not the ceiling, of Christian giving. It's the place to begin, not the place to end.

And it's never too late to start. When my mother was 83 years old, she said to me, "I'm going to start tithing. God has blessed me and I'm going to do what I should have been doing all along."

Mother had never had any money of her own until my dad died. He had handled all the finances and gave her just enough for groceries. Following his death a few years ago, she had to learn how to manage her finances herself. And, among the things she decided she wanted to do was be a steward of all that she had.

It simply reminded me again that it is never too late to start. You can start at fifteen, as I did, or at 85, as she did. The important thing is that you start. And the best time to begin is now.

World Missions Day: Holding Missionary Ropes

Acts 9:23-31; 2 Cor. 11:32-33

William Carey is regarded as the father of the modern mission movement. Raised in a humble home in England, he did not have the privilege of a formal education. But, early in his life, he learned to read and developed an intense desire to learn. He read all the books in his home and all he could borrow in the village. His interest spanned a wide range of subjects — science, history, and travel were dear to his soul. He devoured the “life of Columbus” so eagerly that his friends dubbed him Columbus!

He became a cobbler by trade and following his conversion felt a call into the ministry. Thereafter, he would say, “My work is to preach the gospel. I cobble shoes to pay expenses.” As a minister he continued his fondness for reading, especially reading about people in foreign lands. His attention to missions was first awakened after reading “The Last Voyage of Captain Cook.”

He was in attendance at a minister’s meeting in Northampton once, and toward the close of the evening, when the public services were over, some of the ministers were sitting together in fraternal conversation, when old Dr. Ryland entered the room and invited one of the younger men to pose a subject for general discussion. After a pause, Carey rose, and with some hesitation suggested that he should consider: whether the command given to the apostles to teach all nations was

obligatory on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent.

The question fell on the meeting like a thunderbolt. Dr. Ryland, who was addicted to forcible expressions instantly denounced the position, which seemed to him absurd. "Young man," he explained, "sit down: when God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine!"

Carey sat down but he refused to give up the battle and after a ten-year struggle with his fellow pastors, finally he convinced them to form a society to send out missionaries. This Baptist Missionary Society was established on October 2, 1792, during the fall associational meeting in Kettering.

Their first chosen field was to be India. Andrew Fuller, secretary of the first missionary society said, "We saw that there was a great gold mine in India. But it seemed almost as deep as the center of the earth. Now, who will venture to explore it?"

William Carey responded, "I am willing to go down into the deep shaft, but you, my brethren, must hold the ropes."

And his friends responded, "We endeavor to do so as long as God gives us strength."

Picture if you will, one man being lowered down into a deep cavern to explore its riches. All the while, up above, there are others holding the ropes that lower him safely into the cavern and supply his needs while he is there. Both, the one who goes and those who hold the ropes, are vital to the success of the effort. That is the picture painted for us by this first missionary society.

There is a parallel to this in scripture. It is the experience of the apostle Paul being lowered over the walls of the city of Damascus in order to escape those who wanted to take his life (Acts 9:23-31).

Saul had, at one time, been the chief prosecutor of the church. On his way to Damascus to arrest and imprison Christians he had been gloriously saved. His life now completely turned around, he began immediately to preach and teach about Jesus in the city of Damascus.

So effective was his preaching that his own countrymen

sought to kill him as he had previously sought to kill other Christians. Working with the governor they determined to arrest Paul. When they could not find him they set a watch over the gates of the city to prevent his escape.

So, under the cover of darkness, his Christian friends put him in a basket and lowered him over the walls of the city to safety. In a later account he relates being lowered, "Through a window" (2 Cor. 11:33). The explanation is that on top of the walls of ancient cities houses were often built. In all probability Paul met with some of his Christian friends in such a house. Then, in the darkness of the night, they placed him in a basket and lowered him out the window and down the side of the wall to safety. From there he went to Jerusalem and in time entered into his missionary ministry.

In either case, as Ray Steadman said, Paul had to become "a basket case" before he could be used of God. And he had to have the support of Christian friends.

This experience is an example of partnership missions, of cooperative missions, at its best. The man in the basket was the greatest missionary who ever lived. Those who held the ropes of the basket helped save his life and enabled him to continue his work. Thus they became partners in all he did.

This experience suggests that each of us has a part in God's missionary scheme. It challenges us, every one of us, to either get in the basket or grab hold of a rope. None of us should stand around as a casual observer.

Look at those who held the ropes while Paul was being lowered to safety. What they did teaches us how we are to hold missionary ropes today.

Servants vs. Stars

First, we are to hold on to missionary ropes inconspicuously. Those who held the ropes for Paul were little known, unnamed nobodies. We know nothing about them. We do not know where they came from. We do not know their occupations. We do not know their achievements in life. We do not know their

fate. We don't even know their names. We only know that they held the ropes while Paul escaped to safety.

There is a lesson in this for us. It is this: The great work of the kingdom of God most often goes forward on the shoulders of ordinary people just like you and me.

The Bible, like other books, spotlights its heroes. It brings to center stage it's Abrahams, Davids, Elijahs, and Pauls. But always behind the scenes there is a multitude of little known, unnamed nobodies who made up a supporting cast.

Like those men on the wall at Damascus, most of us are called on to hold the ropes in obscurity. We shall never gain fame or notoriety as great leaders or missionaries. But, we are vital to the success of God's enterprise for we make possible the work of God's great men.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon is perhaps the greatest English speaking preacher who ever lived. At the age of nineteen he accepted the pastorate of New Park Street Chapel in London, England. He had not preached there long until the buildings could not accommodate the crowds. He then led the church to build the famed Metropolitan Tabernacle that seated over 5,000 people. For the rest of his life he preached to 5,000 people on Sunday morning and 5,000 people on Sunday night. Often times on Sunday morning he would plead with those present to not come back that night to leave room for those who could not get in the services that morning.

Spurgeon's books are probably found in more preacher's libraries than the writing of any other person except authors of biblical text. He was one of the truly great preachers of all time.

How Spurgeon was converted is interesting. It happened on June 6, 1850, when he was 15 years of age. That morning he set out for church, but a snowstorm forced him to abandon his plans to attend the church of his choice and to go instead to a nearby chapel. The regular minister did not appear and, in his place, "a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up to the pulpit to preach."

His text, he told the congregation, was, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." The man was

unaccustomed to preaching, and after about ten minutes of disjointed speaking, “he was at the end of his tether,” according to Spurgeon. Then, suddenly turning his eyes to the youthful stranger seated among the twelve or fifteen regular attendees, he said, “Young man, you look very miserable, and you will always be miserable — miserable in life, and miserable in death — if you don’t obey my text’ but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved. Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but to look and live.”

Spurgeon said, “I saw at once the way of salvation and trusted Christ to save me.” It was through the witness of that little known, unnamed nobody that the great Charles Spurgeon came to Christ.

The world has long honored and revered D. L. Moody. He was to his generation what Billy Graham is to ours. In his day, he shook North America and Great Britain for Christ.

There is, in the city of Chicago, a Moody Bible Church, a Moody Bible Institute that has trained thousands of preachers and missionaries through the years, and a Moody Press that has spread the Christian message in written word around the world.

But D. L. Moody, with all of his greatness, was won to Christ by a simple layman. As a young man D. L. Moody was a member of Edward Kimbell’s Sunday School class. One day Mr. Kimbell visited Moody in the shoe store where he worked as a clerk. Finding him in the stockroom this humble Sunday School teacher shared the gospel with his eager young pupil. That day D. L. Moody became a new person in Christ. He went from there to worldwide fame. But he was won by the simple witness of a little known Sunday School teacher.

Abraham Kiaper, the Dutch scholar and theologian, had finished preaching a marvelous sermon one day when a very plain peasant lady came up to him with a shawl over her head and draped across her shoulders and said to him, “Dr. Kiaper, that was a marvelous sermon but you need to be born again.” It wasn’t long until he was. And for the rest of his life he kept the picture of that peasant lady on his desk to remind him what she had done to help him come to the Lord.

It is almost always that way. Behind every bright and shining light for God there are scores of little known, unnamed nobodies, ordinary people who are holding the ropes. And, that's the task God has given to most of us.

Most of us will never blaze a continent for Christ. We will never write a great missionary journal. And we will never establish a church on foreign soil, but we are as vital as those who do if you stay at home and hold the ropes that make it possible for them to do so.

Punching Holes in the Darkness

Second, we are to hold on to missionary ropes gallantly. Those who held the ropes for Paul did so during the darkest of the night. They held on when they probably needed to be asleep. They held on in peril of their own lives. In the darkness of the night and the danger of the hour they held on to the ropes.

The word darkness is used in the Bible in two different ways. Sometimes it refers to literal darkness, the darkness that comes on the earth when the sun goes down. But, at other times, it refers to spiritual and moral darkness. In this instance, it is a reference to physical darkness. But, I want you to think of holding the rope in the midst of the moral and spiritual darkness of our day.

The darkness of the hour can be seen everywhere. I saw it in great contrast when I spent two days in the Ellis Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections. This is the place where Texas' most dangerous prisoners are housed. On a Friday evening I spent an hour and a half in a death row cell with a man who had gone to reform school when he was nine years old. There he learned well the ways of crime and at the time had spent thirty of his forty-seven years in prison. He had no family, no friends, no money, no hope.

The next day I was back on death row again, this time visiting with some of the 180 worst criminals in Texas. Most of them were young men. There were Blacks, Browns, and

Whites. There were Jews, Muslims, Atheists, Agnostics, and some Christians. There were men with college educations and men who couldn't read and write. From every walk of life, every stratum of society, every nationality, they were there. And, they all had one thing in common — they were waiting to die.

As I moved among them I saw their pornography, I heard their profanity, sometimes directed at me. I was keenly aware of their violence, homosexuality, and even drug abuse. Darkness abounded on every hand.

But, in the midst of the darkness there was light. At night we conducted evangelistic services in the 500 seat chapel. As I looked out across the sanctuary there was a literal sea of white uniforms. Every seat filled. They came not because they had to, but because they wanted to. They could have stayed in their cells and read. They could have watched television. They could have played dominos and cards. Many did. But these came filling every seat and looking for a better life. When the invitation was given they came by the scores to commit their lives to Christ. I shall never forget the haunting prayer of one man, "Oh, God, I'm so tired. I'm so tired. I am so tired."

Listen, in a world of moral and spiritual darkness someone must go down into the pit with the light. And, just as surely as some must go, others of us must hold the ropes that enabled them to do so.

Robert Louis Stevenson defined missions in a marvelously and human way. He related how as a boy in Scotland he would stand on the porch of his home and watch the old lamplighter move through his town lighting the gas lamps and leaving pools of light in his path. As the lamplighter approached his house, Stevenson said that he once ran to his mother and cried, "Mother, mother, come and see a man who is punching holes in the darkness."

That's what missions is — punching holes in the darkness of this world. And, God calls every one of us to be about that great assignment. If we are not punching holes ourselves we should be holding the ropes that enable others to do so.

Holding the Rope by Faith

Third, we are to hold on to missionary ropes optimistically. Those who held the ropes for Paul did so without knowing who was in the basket. Oh, they knew his name and reputation. But they had no way of knowing what he would one day become. They had no way of knowing that he would one day honeycomb the Roman Empire with churches. They had no way of knowing that he would eventually write almost two-thirds of the New Testament. And, they could never have imagined that he would one day go as far as Rome and perhaps even to Spain in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. They had no idea who was in the basket.

So it is with us. We often hold the ropes in faith, without knowing what the end result of our efforts will be. Saint Thomas Aquinas was a large gentleman with a round face and a quiet disposition. As a result he earned the title from his fellow students of “the dumb ox.”

Upon the conclusion of a very brilliant recitation one day, much to the surprise of all, his teacher, Albertus Magnus, said, “We call this young man a dumb ox, but his bellowing in doctrine will one day resound throughout the world.”

In the spring of 1846 Richard Fuller held a revival in the First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina. Soon after it closed, a steward from a nearby Methodist church met a First Baptist deacon on a Charleston street.

“How was your revival?” asked the steward.

“Not so good. Not like the old days,” replied the deacon.

“No converts?”

“I think there were a couple of boys, but I forget their names.”

“No big sinners, eh?”

“Right.”

Those two boys matured. One, Henry Allen Tupper, became the second executive secretary of the Foreign Mission Board. The other, James P. Boyce, became the founder and first president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

We seldom know the potential of those we bring in or send

out. We don't know how many churches they may establish, how many converts they may win, how many believers they will disciple. We don't know how many trails they will blaze or journals they will write. We simply hold on in faith believing that God will accomplish his purposes through them and through us.

Hang on Until the End

Fourth, we are to hold on to missionary ropes patiently. Those who held the ropes for Paul stayed with their task until the basket reached the bottom. They didn't let the basket down halfway and then drop it until it hit the ground with a thud. They took hold of the ropes and stayed with them to the end.

There is nothing in the world that can substitute for that kind of staying power. It is often easier to begin the thing than it is to finish it. The real test of character comes in the steadfastness with which one perseveres in the good thing he has begun. Paul raised this question with the Galatians, "You did run well; who did hinder you?"

Some people are adept at starting projects; but after a time, especially if the going gets rough, they lose interest and focus their attention on something else. They lack the quality of perseverance so necessary for any worthwhile achievement. They lack staying power. They, as Vance Havner said, "Go up like a rocket and down like a rock. They start with a fever and they end with a chill."

If I want a light to read by, I would rather have a good long tallow dip candle than a streak of lightening. A very small river will carry a good deal of water to sea if it keeps running.

I have been in the ministry long enough to see many people come and go in God's work. From this vantage point I thank God for those who have had staying power. They started in the choir and they have stayed. They started ushering and they are still at it. They started teaching and they haven't quit. I thank God for you who keep holding the ropes.

That brings us back to where we began: the challenge for all

of us is either get in the basket or grab hold of the rope.

Mildred Brown Duncan wrote this poem:

*"For some there is an open road;
For some there is a gate.
Some are meant to run ahead;
Some are asked to wait.
While some are called to go afar,
Ways of the world to mend,
Some have been commissioned,
To stay at home and send."*

Marine Lt. Clebe McLeary lost an arm, an eye, an ear, and half his face in Vietnam. Twenty-four surgeries later his face was rebuilt. While he was in the hospital, undergoing one of his many surgeries, the men in his command gave him a plaque that read, "In this world of give and take, there are so few who are willing to give what it takes."

What about you? Will you give what it takes? Will you get in the basket or will you grab hold of the rope? Both are essential to missionary success.

Postscript: Dr. Halford Luccock puts his imagination to work on this experience when he asks, "What if the rope had broken?"

How much it meant to the world then and for us, that Paul escaped! We are familiar with the line from Longfellow about Paul Revere: "The fate of a nation was riding that night." There was more than the fate of a nation riding in the basket that carried Paul, the apostle. There was the fate of so much of the world's welfare. How crucially important it was that someone made a good rope! Who the workman was, we do not know. He did not know at all what a part in the world's history his rope was to play. He did a sound, dependable job . . . no amount of sentimental rhapsody or gazing at the moon can make up for poor or sloppy work . . . every life ought to have the equivalent of this tribute, "He made a good rope."

Our rope is the Cooperative Program. Let's keep it strong.