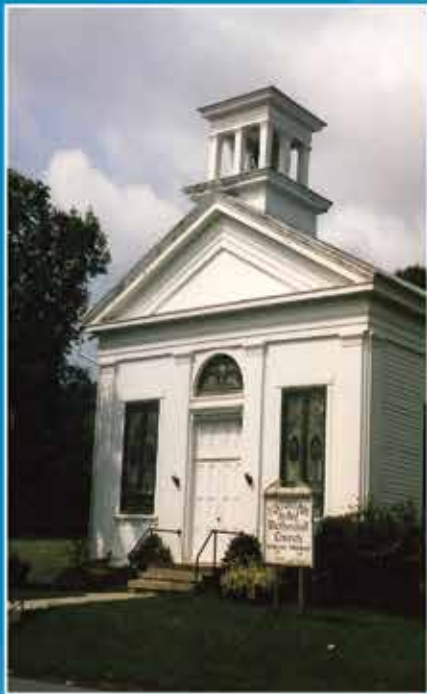


# *B*raman *Foundation of Charities*



The Fultonham United  
Methodist Church

## The Sermons of Richard W. Braman Vol. 8

“

Love Thy Neighbor

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65 Country Colony Rd. | Queensbury, NY 12804

Let us give thanks to God for the life and work of the Rev. Braman. Richard born in Aug. of 1929 wrote and delivered over 360 sermons in which this volume contains the beginning of his preaching and writing. Although, not born to a particularly spiritually or religious family he wrote in his memories of a calling to serve the Lord at an early age of 18. He married his wife Gladys in 1948. Mrs. Braman was saved at the age of 14. She began to pray for Richard and in 1955 Richard had a conversion experience in 1955 as the result of a Rev. Graham crusade. His first sermon called "A Conversion Experience" speaks volumes of his personal conversion.

Rev. Braman began a home Correspondence course through the United Methodist Church in 1956. He worked on his studies for several years until ordained in 1962. He continued to study the Correspondence course in addition to many Cokebury publications until his passing



The Rev. Braman was a writer of Evangelism. He felt strongly that all his sermons and writing should be directed by scripture or several scriptures. As you read his sermons this will become evident. His style was direct and to the point.

Richard believed that Jesus Christ was Gods only son and that who ever believed in Him shall have eternal life. In fact John 3:16 was his favorite Bible verse. He preached not only in the Fultonham United Church, but also in two churches in Ohio: South Harpersfield United Church and the United Methodist Church in Cork, Oh.

As you read these sermons may the Holy Spirit continue to guide your path and may the Grace of our Lord continue to bless your life and your families' lives. If you have never had the experience of realizing Jesus as your personal Savior just ask him to come in your heart and He will. Let us thank God for the life of the Rev. Richard Braman and give praise and thanksgiving.

In Christ,  
The Braman Foundation

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## **A Cardinal Conviction**

### **Scripture: Revelation 1:8-11; 19:1,6,7**

Text is chosen from Revelations 19: 6 “Hallelujah: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” On the threshold of a new age, a man once turned his radio dial and adjusted his television receiver and tuned in on “heaven”. Spiritual radio and spirited television are at least as old as John, who wrote the Book of Revelation.

Again and again, John writes, “I saw” - “I saw” – “I heard” – “I heard” – “I heard”-“ I saw seven golden candlesticks.” - “I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire.” “I saw an angel standing in the sun.” “I saw the holy city.” “I heard” - “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.” “And a voice came out of the throne.”

It was in the reign of the Roman domination. John was a victim of his prosecution, a prisoner on the island of Patmos. In the midst of days confused, chaotic, fearful, perilous, this man tuned in on heaven, heard a message and then proclaimed it. It lifted men to the heights of optimism, faith, endurance, victory.

“I heard,” says John, “the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of many thunders.” A voice like the great human heart throb that rises from a city, mingled with the roar of Niagara and the roll of thunder - and the voice said, “Hallelujah: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.”

The final, irreducible, and inescapable denominator of your universe - God! That was the conviction on which Christ staked his life and marched to Calvary; that is the conviction which has inspired the breed of Saints; and that is the conviction which can turn very ordinary people like ourselves into men and women of whom Christ and the Saints will not be ashamed. This conviction, strong as steel, firm as a rock, and stirring as a battle cry: “the Lord God omnipotent Reigneth.”

We tune in on this quiet fact and make it our conviction. “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” Tune in on heaven and let that proclamation thunder in our ears. Under the figure of the radio, it is a proclamation transmitted and received.

First, let us discuss for a few minutes the proclamation transmitted. It proclaims the omnipotence of God. John’s word means all - strength, all-might, all-power. The word is related to the words grasp, apprehend, control, quip. It raises the idea of the Negro exaltation as sung by Marian Anderson:

“He’s got the whole world in his hands,  
He’s got the big round world in his hands,  
He’s got the whole world in his hands.  
He’s got the wind and the rain in his hands.  
He’s got the tiny little baby in his hands.  
He’s got you and me, brother, in his hands.

He's got everybody in his hands,  
He's got the whole world in his hands."  
That's what omnipotence means.

Of course, there are persons who cannot swallow such "sickening, sentimental, silly stuff." As C.S. Lewis points out, they might prefer to quote the nursery rhyme:

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the Kings, horses, and all the Kings men, can't put Humpty Dumpty together again."

Granted, that all the King's horses and all the Kings men can't put Humpty Dumpty, the broken egg, the shattered world, together again. But that is not all. That is not the complete story of Humpty Dumpty, who built the wall and who put Humpty Dumpty on the wall in the first place?

First, we have the creative power of God. God holds the world in his hands. The world may seem to be going to pieces, disintegrating - well, it had to be integrated before it could disintegrate. I find no convincing argument that God has abdicated his creative power. Science and Providence convince us that God's creative power is still at work. With God working, something new can happen in the world. Our text means just that. Catch the optimism of that possibility.

Second, we have the redemptive power of God. God's redemptive power is active in the world. Using the word redemptive too narrowly and inadequately, perhaps, never the less, it does mean that God can and does take evil and bring good out of it.

There is no "breaking up." without it being also a "breaking open." Every event, whether it be the direct consequence of sin, or the result of natural disasters, or even the working of pure evil, also serves God's purpose, and works for the punishment of evil, the retribution of wrong, and the setting forth of the witness of the children of God.

The crucifixion of Jesus was a cruel, sinful, evil thing. The Cross of Christ has become the greatest symbol and, I believe, the most potent force for righteousness in the world. Christ is the power of God not only to defeat evil; he is more than conqueror. He can use that evil as an instrument for good. When did God abdicate the power which he exhibited in Christ? That power is still in the world. "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

Thirdly, we have the indwelling power of God. The Lord, God omnipotent, has power to indwell his creation. He flung nothing into this universe to run down like a clock. Certain religions believe the opposite. It is not what we hear in the thunderous voice. God's creative and redemptive power is ever active in every clod, in every stick and stone, in every animated thing, in the soul of every man. This belief is a carolling of our conviction that the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. This is the message from the throne of God. Secondly - the reception of the proclamation. What does it mean to receive this message? What did it mean

to John? Endurance.

He was on the island of Patmos - the salt mines, chains, imprisonment. Over that environment, he had no control. In that environment, "he shared fully the grim reality of tragedy and evil."

But John lived on two levels. On the upward level, he heard the voice from the throne. That made all the difference in the world. He could endure. The imprisonment, because he was free, "he lived in another environment which no temporal circumstance could destroy. He lived in a dimension of eternity as well as in a dimension of time."

What did the message mean to those who heard the words from the throne as mediated by John? Some of these went to the stake, some to the lions, some to the cross. These words for them meant serenity. This word is too weak, but the fact is that these martyrs in their suffering became quiet, unperturbed, unworried, serene.

The message meant patience to many Christian men across the centuries. Patience is the hard virtue. The vision of John brings two men of faith, the conviction that God can never be defeated. From Habakkuk 2: 3, we read: "The vision is yet for an appointed time. - though it tarry, wait for it: because it will surely come, it will not tarry." We have patience because we have hope.

By this conviction, we have comfort. This is comfort. This is strength for courage. In this conviction, we have the comfort of knowing that life is not meaningless, that God reigns with purpose, and that God weaves everything into a plan, even disease and frustration and bereavement and sadness.

The Bishop of Winchester tells a grand story of two officers who were lying wounded in a war hospital. One said to the other, "Well, I really don't care whether I get through or not. It is a world hardly worth living in. I have got no job to go back to. And it will be impossible to get one anyway. What is there to live for?" "Well, said the other officer, I feel rather like you, but with me it is different because I have got someone who very much cares whether I get through. There is a girl up in Scotland and she cares."

God cares, - that puts the comfort into life, which is also courage.

This conviction carries the overtones of victory. This victory annihilates fear, it wins the peace - it is victory in which we are more than conquerors. Thirdly - if we hear this proclamation from the throne of God; if we give response to it in endurance, serenity, patience, courage, and victory; if this becomes a cardinal conviction, then one thing more. Carlisle pricks us with the words, "Conviction is worthless unless it is converted into conduct."

Our conduct: we will want to join in the mighty. "Hallelujah."

We will want to proclaim the message. We are surrounded by a multitude of people who do not have this conviction. They are fearful and frustrated; life has become meaningless and purposeless. They become the victims of vanity and evil. Our conviction must become conduct that brings our conviction to bear upon the life around us.

As we begin the New Year of 1967, let us come to our Lord's table with a true conviction that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God and Lord and Savior. The Lord Supper means several things to us as Christians.

We remember Christ, who was crucified for our redemption.

We celebrate the risen Christ, not dead, but present in our midst.

We commit ourselves by faith to believe and follow him.

We feel the oneness of all believers in him, the visible and invisible fellowship and of the church universal.

We acknowledge our frailties and express sorrow for our past sins.

We reminisce ourselves that we cannot live by bread alone and we seek nourishment for our souls.

We recall with thanksgiving the gift of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

These are some of the meanings of our Lord Supper - something we should think about as we come to his table this day. The Lord's Supper should be important to us and hold a special place in our hearts. If it does, I'm sure we will feel his presence here this day. May God guide us as we partake of the bread and wine. Let us also remember - "God will not change. The restless years may bring - sunlight and shade; the glories of the spring and the silent gloom of sunless winter hours, joy mixed with grief - sharp thorns with fragrant flowers; Earthlights may shine a while, and then grow dim, but God is true; there is no change in Him."



## **A Most Unnatural Thing To Do**

### **Scripture: Luke 17: 11-19**

Text is chosen from 105 Psalm - verse 1; “Oh give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples!”

Some time ago there was a popular musical comedy which had in it a song about “doing what comes naturally.” And under the heading, one could think of a hundred-and-one-things - but giving thanks would not be one of them.

It is natural to hope. “While there is life, there’s hope”, sang John Gay, and Alexander Pope wrote of hope “springing eternal in the human breast.” It is natural to pray, especially when one is in trouble, like the mariners in Shakespeare’s “Tempest”, who cried: “All is lost; to prayers, to prayers!”

But it is not natural to give thanks, just as it is not natural to hate. You have to be carefully taught to give thanks. Parents, I feel sure, will bear out the truth of what I am saying. It comes naturally for children to ask for things, to want them, to take them - but you have to teach children to say “thank you.”

A boy wrote Mr. Edward Bok, asking him for his autograph. A few days later, the autograph was received. The boy then wrote a thank you letter to Mr. Bok. Back came a letter from that distinguished gentleman, stating that he had given many thousands of his autographs, but that this was the first letter of thanks he had received. It is to be noted that the boy wrote the letter only under the insistence of his parents.

Not only children, but we adults take many things for granted. I do not feel that we are not grateful for things we receive, for I believe we are, we just plain forget to say thank you. At least this sounds like a good excuse anyway.

Now Paul says, “give thanks for everything.” Paul meant everything, the good and the bad, what you like and what you don’t like. There is a poem entitled, “For Joy Touched with Pain”:

“I thank thee, too, that thou hast made joy to abound;  
So many gentle thoughts and deeds circling us round,  
that in the darkest spot on earth some love is found.  
I thank thee more that all our joy is touched with pain;  
that shadows fall on brightest hours, that the thorns remain;  
So that earth’s bliss may be our guide, and not our chain.  
I thank Thee, Lord, that thou hast kept the Best in store;  
We have enough, yet not too much to long for more;  
A yearning for a deeper peace, not known before.”

It is in Luke that we are indebted for the story of the 10 lepers who, seeing Jesus passing along, stood at a

distance, lifted up their voices and cried, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” And Jesus said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” It was required that the priest should give a clean bill of health to cured lepers before they could take their place in society again. The lepers were not cured when they started on their journey, but they must have had faith that they would be made whole before they finished it. And, as the story says, on their way to the priest the miracle happened. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, did not bother to go in; he turned back praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.

Now, Luke emphasizes that this one grateful person was a Samaritan - that is, an outsider, a foreigner. No doubt he does that because he himself was a foreigner, and he took special delight in the grateful witness of one who, like himself was not a Jew. However, that may be, it is the conclusion of the story that has the most relevance for us. One man was grateful for the cure and said so; the other nine quickly forgot or, at any rate, made no attempt to find and thank the one who had cured them. Jesus asked, “Were not the ten cleansed? Where are the nine?”

It is commonly accepted that the one who returned to give thanks was the normal or natural person, and the nine who did not return were abnormal or unnatural. But my contention is that the nine were the normal ones and the one who returned abnormal. The nine did the natural thing, - that is, took life for granted; the one who returned did the unnatural thing - that is, took life for gratitude. And it is not so much that the nine are to be condemned as that the one is to be commended.

I’m sure we all agree that it is natural for us to take life pretty much for granted, as long as everything is going along OK. In fact, as long as we are healthy, we do not even think about where our living comes from. But let us get sick or a member of our family get seriously ill, and we begin to realize life cannot be taken for granted and that we give thanks to him who is creator and father of us all. All of us are quick to pray and ask God for help when we are in trouble, but we are rather slow in thanking him for what we do have and for just plain living day by day.

One evening, during the depression of the 30s, Doctor William L. Stidger and some friends were talking about banks closing, and people out of work, and salaries going down. It was a pretty gloomy conversation. “There isn’t much to be thankful for,” one friend said. Finally, Bill Stidger had enough. “Well, I, for one, am grateful to Mrs. Wendt,” he said. He went on to explain that Mrs. Wendt was an old schoolteacher who, 30 years before, went out of her way to introduce him to Tennyson. “Did you ever thank her?” someone asked. Dr. Stidger had to admit he never had, but that evening, he sat down and wrote Mrs. Wendt. A few weeks later came a reply written in the uncertain sprawl of an aged woman. “My dear Willie: I want you to know what your note meant to me. I am an old lady in my 80s living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely and seeming like the last leaf on the tree. You will be interested to know, Willie, that I taught school for 50 years and in all that time yours is the first letter of appreciation I have ever received. It came on a bleak, cold morning, and it cheered my lonely old heart as nothing has cheered me in many years.”

Generally, it takes very little of our time and we really do not have to go out of our way very much to let others know our appreciation. It cannot always be taken for granted, and very often it is nice to hear it directly instead of being just implied. Speaking of thanks, there is no thanks for Santa Claus either. Now if you think I am on the wrong track in what I am trying to say, I would ask you to listen to this. Once a postal employee studied the mail which came to the dead letter office in Washington, D.C. addressed to Santa Claus. In the three months preceding Christmas, there were several thousands of letters asking for things. In the month after Christmas there was only one card addressed to Santa Claus giving thanks. So, you children remember it is more important to thank Santa Claus than it is to ask him for something. Life is not a one-way street. There has to be give and take, receiving and thanks.

A small boy visited a country grocery with his aunt. The clerk took a stick of candy from the showcase and was about to give it to him, when his aunt said, "say thank you." The little fellow replied, "her ain't give it to me yet."

It is proverbial that there is no gratitude in politics and the public has often quickly forgotten its greatest benefactors. Most politicians can tell you that little thanks is given to them when they do something to help the public, but let them make one mistake or do one thing to go against a person and that is the end of them. All the good they had done is forgotten.

There is no organization to which so many have owed so much as the Red Cross, yet Jean Henri Dunant, its founder, was allowed to sink into poverty and obscurity. How quickly and easily things and people are forgotten, regardless of how great they may have been.

I truly believe that gratitude is a Christian grace. Christians are thankful people, for, to Christians, there comes a desire and a power to do what comes unnaturally. Make no mistake about it, there is a considerable difference between the man in Christ and the man, not in Christ. Paul makes this clear: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation: old things are passed away; behold, all things become new." and one of the differences is just this: the man in Christ no longer associates himself with the nine who take life for granted, but the one who takes life for gratitude. Gratitude is the dominant note in the Christian life. Why? Because the Christian has been brought face to face with what Christ has done for him - and what it cost Christ to do it. The Christian knows that the Son of God has dealt out unspeakable and undeserved mercy to him, and because of that he has infinitely more cause for rejoicing than for complaining.

I believe in general this is the feeling and attitude of a Christian. As is revealed in this remarkable sequence. "First, I looked. Then I began to see what was in front of me. I noticed what I saw was amazingly beautiful. The sequence then is, you see, then you admire. Next admiration leads with the same inevitableness to gratitude, next, gratitude leads to humility, for the person who received much feels grateful and then humble, because he wonders how he can have deserved such an extravagant kindness. Humility is naturally followed by a feeling of wonder and adoration towards the source of their miracles, the God who made them and put them there."

I think as we sit with our families at our Thanksgiving tables, it would be well for us to remember that to give thanks is an unnatural thing to do. Because it is unnatural, we must train ourselves and our children, not to just say thanks with our lives, but to actually feel thankful in the heart. To give thanks is definitely a thoughtful thing to do. Little do we realize how our kind thank you can fill another person's life with joy and happiness. To give thanks is a wholesome thing to do. We feel better within ourselves when we thank someone for something they have done for us, when we thank God for everything we have. And finally, to give thanks is a Christian thing to do. Let Jesus Christ come into your life, and you will truly know what being thankful really means. It is written, and by me, who knew plenty of trouble and difficulty, pain and suffering. From Ephesians 5:20, we read; "Always give thanks for everything to God. Our father, as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ." Thanks for everything. Surely it is only the person whose life is hid with Christ in God who can really do that, for everything includes not only the joys of life but the sorrows of life as well. And there I believe is the whole thing in a nutshell, truly God has blessed us. And on this Thanksgiving Day and every day, let us give him true and hearty thanks.

## **All That Is Within Me**

### **Scripture: Psalm 103:1-5; 19-22; 104:1-4**

Text is chosen from 103rd Psalms verse 1: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.”

This man who was having a dialogue with his soul, is in vivid contrast with another who was engaged in a similar activity. This latter was the rich man of Jesus parable who, when he prospered, decided to build great barns to shelter his fruits and grains; then said he to his soul, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.”

We do a great deal of talking with ourselves. How revealing if we had a tape recording of these dialogues! Sometimes, I suppose it would be the pattern of a fool. At other times, a wise man’s words of wisdom. Surely the dialogue between the Psalmist and his soul was on a high level when he said, “Bless the Lord, old my soul.”

What do I say when I initiate a conversation with my soul? What shall I say tomorrow, on Thanksgiving Day, if perchance I turned aside long enough to speak to my soul? What will it be? Will I initiate the dialogue with words of complacency, “eat, drink and be merry”? Or will I call upon my soul to bless the Lord for his goodness? Sometimes we need to stop and think of what Thanksgiving really is. It surely isn’t just another paid holiday. It just isn’t a time to eat, drink and be merry. Thanksgiving is the outward expression of an inward feeling. At times, our thankfulness is insufficient because our perception is inadequate. “Always for everything give thanks” is not the common practice. Those things which God surely does give us, we pretty well take for granted, until in some way we lose them, then we realize what our blessings really are.

“All that is within me, bless his holy name.” What is there within me with which to bless the Lord? First of all, taking her lead from the psalmist, let my “memory” bless the Lord. “Forget not all his benefits.” Memory recalls the reasons for individual Thanksgiving. Sins have been forgiven. Diseases have been received healing. Life has been redeemed from evil. Constant love has been round about me. Good things have been heaped upon me. My youth has been renewed.

Memory reviews the reasons for national Thanksgiving. “He made his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel.” Each Thanksgiving Day we recall the history of the nation, reappraise the heritage we have received from our fathers, and write upon the tissues of memory God’s dealings with us in recent events. The Psalmist bids his memory to bless the Lord. A visitor asked a class of deaf mutes to define gratitude. One of them wrote on the blackboard. “Gratitude is the memory of the heart.”

Secondly, on another day perhaps the Psalmist again holds dialogue with his soul. In meditation he blesses the Lord. His mind is active. His thinking brings him to thanking. Are we really ever still enough to think? I’m sure if we are, we will get around to thanking, also. In meditation, the Psalmist calls upon his soul to

bless the Lord for his being. In meditation he sees the power and providence of God in “seven wonders”: sky, earth, water, vegetation, moon and sun, sea, the gift of life. The response of his soul: “I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.” The Psalmist bids his meditative mind to bless the Lord.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his hold name. Bless the Lord O My soul and forget not all his benefits.” What’s the key to it? Is there a theme that runs through it? Yes, it is repeated: the significant word is “all”. “All that is within me, bless his holy name, forget not “all” his benefits.” Here is an all-out thankfulness which makes us realize how little our own gratitude is in comparison. That it may be worthy with the Psalmist as you read this 103rd & 104th Psalm following his thought in two ways.

First are the gifts of His Protection and secondly, the gifts of His Provision. But the other side of it is equally important in an all-out thanksgiving. “All that is within me, bless his holy name.” You see, when you count all that God gives, you in turn must give all. Surely there is more within than memory and mind. These lines of praise and thanksgiving are weighted with passion. They come from the heart. The Psalmist soul include the heart’s emotions. The heart has its reason for praise. The line of the soul’s response throb with emotion.

The heart exults in the mercy of God. “The Lord is merciful and gracious” the exultation of the heart rises to such a pitch that the angels of God, the hosts of God, all his works are called upon to bless the Lord in the mighty climax of praise.

And surely, we find between the lines of the meditative nature psalm that heart’s emotion which comes upon us and almost overwhelms us, when least we expect it, from the colors of a sunset, the song of a bird, the fragrance of a rose, the leap of a deer, the sight of a ship sailing out to sea, the freshness of an autumn morning. How nature and life around us conspire sometimes to quicken our souls and cause us to praise the Lord. The Psalmist bids his heart to praise the Lord. Surely the presence of God is all around us in everything he has created. Without these things life would be empty, without meaning. How can we but help to praise God if we actually are alive and realize these things. For these things that surround us day in and day out we are thankful.

Fourthly, is there something lacking in these dialogues with the soul? Is the soul not more than memory, mind, and heart. The modern man includes the will within the compass of the soul. Is this Psalmist satisfied with the answers of his soul to his call? On Thanksgiving Day, perhaps it is well to lay aside for the time, the activism of our lives. Let the ‘deadly doing’ be done for the day. It is a day of memory, of meditation, of the heart’s emotion. Any yet the note of the soul’s intention has also been sounded by the Psalmist. It is as clear as a bell as its resonates. It is a deep diapason. “I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.” This praise of my memory, of my mind, of my heart, is not for the day alone - for “as long as I live” this thanksgiving of my soul to my God shall be my song throughout all eternity.

I do find something missing in these psalms. It is written that men of old, without us, are not made perfect. Nor are their works made perfect without us. Nor is the 103rd Psalm made perfect without an addition from us. I wonder how the Psalmist could have missed it. But let any man count his blessings and he will miss some. It belongs to the heart of man, to love his kinfolk, his friends, his neighbors, his fellow men. There are the merest suggestions of this in the Psalms. This must be added to the soul's blessing of the Lord, the love of our hearts "all that is within me.," by the love of my heart for my family and friends, I will bless the Lord.

A minister friend of mine told me this story. He said, "Some years ago I was appointed to a church. A man often attended our services with his good wife and children, but he himself was not a member of the church. His wife became ill with tuberculosis and was sent to the sanitarium. The husband was very sorrowful. He asked me to pray for her. After a while he came to me, his face shining with great joy. Pastor, he said, I am so happy. My wife's cured. She's coming home. My children and I are very, very happy. There was a pause, and then, he said, Pastor, I have attended church, but I have not given my heart to God. Now I am so thankful for all the goodness from God, I want to give my heart to him. He became a member of the church and a good Christian, always thanking God for his grace and all other blessings." This is exactly what is meant by, "bless the Lord, all my soul and all that is within me, bless his holy name."

Tomorrow, on this Thanksgiving Day, let each of us pause long enough to actually count our blessings and to realize where they come from. And then let us go on to give our heart to God who has made all our blessings possible. Let us give our all to our Lord, all that is within us.

## **Always Brothers**

### **Scripture: Romans 8:14-19**

Text is from Matthew 6:9-13; “Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” When Jesus prayed from the cross, he said, “Father.” He taught his followers to pray, saying “Our Father.” These two words bind all men into a brotherhood under the fatherhood of God.

Whether we assert or deny the brotherhood of man, the fact remains that we are bound up in the bundle of life together. We are always brothers. We may not like this truth; we may even resent it. We may deny it. Denial is dangerous. We may deny the law of gravitation, but life based upon that denial will somewhere, sometime, result in a smashup. Deny the fact of the brotherhood of man, by that denial we do not dissipate human brotherhood; we remain brothers, brothers in fear, in conflict, in desperation, in despair - yet always brothers.

In an issue of “The Mennonite”, a photograph depicts three Angolan refugees in flight - the leader, legless, his two friends blind. The captain tells us that the three have traveled for 50 miles; it also notes that as many as 600 such refugees streamed daily into the Congo from Angola. Wounded, exhausted, starving, they came seeking help -who measures the place of the legless and the blind or slow pilgrimage on an African path? The captain speaks of them as “friends”. Man measures his brother by nearness, familiarity, shared interests, social proximity, need. Need eventually wins, even over the miles. The blind inspire the legless and the legless lead the blind. In an article accompanying the picture in the “Mennonite”, Hugh Samson reports an interview with a doctor once of Florida but now of Leopoldville. Why had the doctor left his practice among the named, the important, the known near him at home? “The need”, he replied. “I read of it in a church paper and discussed the situation with a missionary home on furlough from the Congo. I just locked my surgery door and came.” And so, when it comes right down to bare facts, we as Christians cannot deny the brotherhood of man. We are all brothers.

This morning, let us consider together the Lord’s Prayer as a Charter of Human Brotherhood. First of all, it is a Charter of Human Brotherhood by its affirmation of the fatherhood of God.

Brother is the New Testament name for the Christian. In Acts and the Letters of Paul, the Christians are called brothers (brethren) no fewer than one hundred and fifty times. There is clearly no word more fitted to describe what Christians are.

Brothers are connected with each other because they are connected with a common father. So, Christians are connected with each other because they are connected with a common father, who is God, and a common Lord, who is Jesus Christ. Men can only be one with each other when they are one with God in through Jesus Christ. The Brotherhood of man can only stem from the fatherhood of God.



This must mean that the church is essentially a family. The church is not an association, nor an institution, nor an organization; it is primarily a family. The atmosphere of any congregation should be that of a family. First and foremost, any meeting of the church must be a family gathering.

If the essence of the church is that it is a family, then it ought also to be a unity.

In one of his dispatches Nelson describes his victory as being due to the fact that, as he puts it, "I had the happiness to command a band of brothers."

It is to be noted that this unity does not mean uniformity. In any family, there are differences of temperament, differences of outlook, differences of interest. In any family. There are disagreements and debates. In any family there is give and take, and it must be so in the family of the church. The fact that the church is a family does not obliterate the differences, but it means that the differences occur all within an atmosphere of love. The odd paradox is that it is only when we love each other that we can afford radically to differ with each other.

Because Christians are brothers, and because the church is therefore a family, there can never be any distinctions within the church. There can never be any distinction between those who are "important" and those who are "ordinary". The odd fact is that in a family, someone who is very important as the outside world sees importance loses his importance altogether. The man who is a "VIP" outside the home is simply daddy to the children and a lovable nuisance to his wife! And the mother whom the public does not know at all, is the person round whose family revolves and on whom all its members depend. Love has obliterated the distinctions which exist within the world. Only when the church is one united band of brothers is the church a true church.

And so, because our Lord, as he taught all his followers to pray, "Our father", we are all brothers regardless of where we are, regardless of the color of our skin, regardless of our wealth. We are all brothers in Christ. Secondly - the Charter (the Lord's Prayer) implicated we are brothers by the inclusiveness of God's purpose.

"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in heaven." This has reference to God's Kingdom, God's reign, God's rule, God's sovereignty.

The scope of God's Kingdom is not limited. Here is no suggestion that God's purposes are geographical, or narrowed by the racial, social or any other condition of man.

The inclusiveness of the will of God is taught us through the history of the Hebrew people, and especially by the words of the prophets. Jesus, by life in proclamation, fulfills these words and manifest in his death the will of God for the people, for the whole world. Thirdly - we are brothers in our need for bread. "Give us this day our daily bread". We cannot live without physical bread. Nor can we live on bread alone. There

is hunger in all our hearts for the bread of life, hunger for eternity.

And regardless of who we are or where we live, all of us still have this hunger and need for both physical and spiritual bread. And as brothers the search for this bread of life will always continue. Perhaps it's a mutual instinct that all of us have within us, the search to find the truth.

Fourth - we are all brothers in our need for forgiveness. "And forgive us, our debts, as we forgive our debtors." No man's sin stands alone; though it hurts the self, it also hurts the brotherhood. Having sinned against one, and that one having sinned against another, the whole brotherhood becomes entangled in sin. The untangling comes by the principle expressed in prayers. Even as we ask forgiveness of God, we give forgiveness to our brothers, and they do the same by us.

As Christians and because we are brothers, we should never be happy as long as one of our brothers is in trouble. And we cannot ask God for forgiveness unless we are willing to forgive someone for something he might have done to us.

All of us truly do need forgiveness for we are all sinners in the sight of God. We have fallen short of the glory of God. We know this because Jesus Christ died for our sakes that our sins could be forgiven. Forgiveness is something again that has to be felt in the heart and not just spoken with the lips. Too many of us hold a grudge and retain revenge in our hearts. Actually, when we do labor these kinds of feelings in our hearts, we have no room for love and forgiveness. In fact, we do not have time for anything else. Regardless of how perfect we may think we are; we all are sinners and require God's forgiveness. Fifth - we are brothers in our inability to cope with evil. "And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

It should require little argument to convince us of our inability to win victory over evil in this world. Our own lives bear witness to this. The morning newspaper, with its daily portrayal of crime and conflict, calls upon all of us together to establish righteousness and peace. No man can win victory over evil alone; we need one another; we need the deliverance of God. This also is a factor in our universal brotherhood.

The argument that if I live my own life to the best of my ability with God's help, that's all I have to be concerned about. That is wrong. Sure, it's a good place for every one of us to start, but we have to be concerned for our brother. It is a constant battle for all of us. To cope with and destroy evil in the world. You know it seems regardless of what is started today, it could start out being a benefit to all, someone in the end turns it into evil with harm to nearly everyone. We seem to have the ability to turn good things into evil without hardly trying. And so, our ability to overcome evil is very low. In fact, most of us are easy prey to temptation and fall into these traps without even trying. We allow evil things to go around us because of our complacency, indifference, and self-righteous attitude. We are not concerned as long as it doesn't affect us directly, but we fail to realize if it affects anyone, we should be concerned. We are truly all brothers.

Sixth - the great climax of the Lord's Prayer, "For thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory;" reminds us that we may be brothers. In the adoration of God, we are brothers in a Hallelujah chorus. We are brothers in worship, brothers in the new moment of a great drama.

The prayer, which we so often pray, points the way for us to follow; surrender to God's plans and purposes; share our bread and seek also the satisfaction of the spiritual needs of men; forgive others and be forgiven; accept together God's grace to deliver us from evil - and it will follow that we shall lift our voices and our hearts in a triumphant paean of adoration and praise.

If there were no other reason than the fact that all of us need God, this alone would be enough to join us all together as brothers. God has created us - all of us, and certainly we all have this in common. But for the Christian to say he isn't concerned about anything Except one affects him directly, I believe is wrong for sooner or later everything will eventually affect. All. Of us and by that time it will be too late to do anything about it. And so, we are our brothers in Christ our Lord. I would like to close by reading a poem entitled, "Brotherhood", by Edwin Markham.

The crest and crowning of all good,  
Life's final star is brotherhood;  
For it will bring again to earth.  
Her long-last Poesy and mirth,  
Will send new light in every face,  
A kingly power upon the race,  
And till it comes, we men are slaves,  
And travel downward to the dust of graves.  
Come, clear the way then, clear the way:  
Blind creeds and kings have had their day.  
Break the dead branches from the path:  
Our hope is in the aftermath -  
Our hope is in heroic men,  
Star-led to build the world again.  
To this event the ages ran:  
Make way for man.

## **As The Bible Sees Man**

### **Scripture: Psalm 8**

Text is from the 8th Psalm verse 4; “What is man that thou art mindful of man?” In ages past, when science fiction was really fiction and not a frightening reality, I read a story about four brave cosmonauts who landed on another planet. Disembarking from their spacecraft, they were confronted by a group of scaly little creatures, who, by strange coincidence, happen to speak English. One of them stepped forward and addressed the chief cosmonaut. “What are you?” He asked. “I am a man,” came the reply. This scaly little creature looked more puzzled than ever. “And what,” he inquired, “is a man?” It was a fundamental question.

“What is a man?” The whole political, social, and economic structure of a society is largely determined by its answer to this vital question. Is man a person or a pawn? Is he a cog in the wheel of a state or a free, creative being capable of accepting responsibility? This inquiry is as old as ancient man and as new as the morning newspaper. Although there is a widespread agreement in asking this question, there is sharp disagreement in answering it.

Again, we ask the question, what is man? From all directions, - from science, psychology, politics, industry, - come the answers, the world estimate of man, and we could make them a very absorbing comparative study. At this moment, we are not interested in what the world thinks of him, but in what the Bible thinks of him. How does the Bible see us?

First of all, the Bible sees man as a creature. In the very opening verse of the Book of Genesis, we read, “God created man - male and female, he created them.” That is not a scientific statement; It has nothing to do with men’s descent from the apes. To say that man is a creature is at theological statement. It means that he did not bring himself into existence, nor does he keep himself in existence, nor does he set the terms of his existence. Man exists, you exist by the creative power, within the Providence and under the sovereignty of Almighty God.

Many things that we read and study in the Bible, many things that we believe, because we have been taught that over the years, cannot be proven by scientific methods. Each and every one of us need a base to start from, and I believe the only firm foundation is God. We are taught many principles in school which we cannot prove either, but we believe them because the one we have faith in, is the one teaching us. Many times, we question all that we read in God’s word, which I believe is good. I do not and I am sure you do not have all the answers, but together we can come to a conclusion that God would have us come to. To believe with some scientists that man descends from apes is ridiculous, because if we believe in God, then we certainly believe in his word and his word says he created man in his own image. That should be good enough for us and besides, you know, sometimes we become so involved with trying to find answers to trivial things that we overlooked the important ones, and we lose the whole point to our Christianity.

Man, - we tend to forget the fact that we are a creature of God and man exist by the creative power, within the Providence and under the sovereignty of the Almighty God. Man forgets his stature as a creature. He leaves God, out of the world, and the chaos of the world reflects it.

It is no denial of man's dignity to accept his rightful status as a creature and acknowledge his dependence upon God; rather it will give him a dignity that he could never give himself.

Someone has said that the doghood of a dog is in the dog, but the manhood is not in the man; it is in his relationship to God. And when he breaks that relationship, he loses something of his manhood. This I know and believe with my whole being. If we leave God out or somehow lose him, then we will become lost also.

Secondly, the Bible sees man as more than a creature. It sees him as a child of God. Again, open the Bible at its first chapter and you will read these words, "God created man in his own image," which I have said before all else had been completed, - day and night, earth and sky, beast and fowl, tree and flower. And God surveyed his creation experiment and saw that it was good. Only the climax remained, then God said, "Now I will fashion a new order of being, I shall call him man."

He will differ from all other creatures, not only in degree but in kind. To him, I will give reason, intelligence, the faculty of creating and appreciating beauty, a moral sense, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and the freedom to choose right or wrong. He shall be the Lord of my creation, my agent upon earth. He shall work with me and enjoy friendship with me. He shall be to me as a son to a father; and to make that possible I shall make him like myself. And give him what I alone possess, eternal personality. "God created man in his own image."

We therefore are truly children of God our father. He created you and I. When we lose the conviction that every man is God's child, made "a little less than God," substituting for it our pathetic depreciation of human life as "so small in this big universe", we replace persons with paper, souls with systems. This we tend to do nowadays with the many modern gadgets and the many new ways of doing things. Perhaps we need to consider this also when we are considering the racial struggle in our country today and when we quickly start judging another individual. This truly is a conviction we must hold.

The most healing and comforting word that the church can speak to modern man is one that will restore his individuality and give him back a sense of dignity and worth as a person. We as individuals or collectively as a government, do not have the right to take away an individual's privilege and human rights.

Look at Jesus. If you want to know how the Bible sees man; look especially at the man of Nazareth himself. That Jesus Christ, our brother in the flesh, could call himself God's son means that in all of us there is the capacity for the glory and splendor of the children of God.

When Emerson Hall was being built at Harvard, the faculty decided that upon the frieze there should be a carved quotation from Protagoras, "Man is the measure of all things." However, President Elliott decided differently. The faculty dispersed for their summer holidays, and when they returned, they found the frieze complete and inscribed on it the words of the 8th Psalm. "What is man that thou art mindful of him?"

Thirdly, the Bible sees man as a sinner. We look at Christ and we learn what it means to be human, mature, full grown, and perfect. We look at ourselves and we know that compared with him, we are not men at all, but sub-men, who have fallen far below the level of true human nature. You recall Paul's words, "We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The New England Bible translates it, "We have missed the divine splendor." We are to think of sin, not as something we have done, but as something we have missed - the splendor of God revealed in the man of Jesus Christ.

Most of us think pretty highly of ourselves. Very often we compare ourselves with other people and we think I'm better than he is; I go to church every Sunday, I read the Bible, I pray to God, I'm interested in helping in civic affairs, I don't drink or smoke, I really live a good clean life. I'm just about as perfect as a human being can be. If you think this way of yourself, you have already made the first mistake. Once you start comparing yourself with someone else, you are lost. In the first place, you have no right to judge an individual. Secondly, you can never tell what or how another person feels in his heart. You cannot always judge a person by his outward appearances. Of course, I believe you can go too far the other way and be too humble; perhaps even to the point where you downgrade yourself. This isn't good either. I feel if we can remember that we are human beings and that we do make mistakes and therefore we are not perfect, we will be on the right track. We need to realize we are all sinners in the sight of God, and that Jesus Christ died, that our sins could be forgiven and that we could have eternal and everlasting life. So, you aren't as perfect as you think you are.

You're like a \$20 bill that's been in every pawn shop, every bar, and every old woman's stocking, and is covered with dust and grease and microbes till you wouldn't hardly hold it in your hand; but it's still a \$20 bill - that'll buy \$20 worth every time - and what? Whenever you like, you can get gold for it.

Fourthly, the Bible doesn't leave us in a state of despair. Look at your reflection in its pages and you will see the whole truth about yourself; that you are a creature, a child of God, a fallen child, but also - and this is what really matters, you are a child for whom Christ died. Out in the world we have our criteria by which to measure human worth and in the world, we attach varying degrees of importance to it. We ask of a man, "Where does he come from?" "How much money has he made?" "What has he done?" "What kind of pedigree does he have?" In the Bible, however, such questions melt into insignificance, for the final truth about any person, regardless of his credit rating, his background, or his achievements, is the truth that he is a man for whom Christ died.

It is rather amazing if we really stop and think how most of us measure an individual. Nearly every meaning, stick we use, is not even considered in God's analysis of a person. Perhaps it is because we

cannot measure what a man processes internally and if he happens to be a person that outwardly doesn't show what he feels and believe, we misjudge him wrongly. Unless we really get to know him personally, you see, God has the upper hand on us because he really knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our thoughts and our feelings.

The Bible sees man as a creature, created by God; as a child of God, created in God's image; as a sinner, all sinners in the sight of God, but by far the greatest importance is that the Bible sees man as persons from whom Christ died. Regardless of how little value we think someone is or even of how little value we ourselves are, we and all people are important to God. As well as equal in his site. May each and every one of us here this morning come to really and truly know and feel this in our hearts. If we do, I know that God will truly bless us absolutely abundantly

# **Centering Your Life on God**

## **Scripture: Acts 5:17-29**

I have chosen text from Acts 5:29; “Every human life has this much in common with a circle; it must have a center if it is to be true, a point around which everything revolves, something that ties all together, coordinates, its manifold activities and interest, Something that keeps it from going off in all directions at once, from dissipating its energy so that instead of being channeled they are spilled on the ground like a bucket of water, spread over the earth with no intention or result. Unlike a circle, however, a human life does not always have a center.

What is the center of your life? It is yourself? It is not to be wondered that there are thousands of completely self-centered people in the world. They are invariably miserable, and very seldom do they know why. For most people who are self-centered do not know it. Everyone else knows it, but they do not.

With everyone pushing toward a goal they have set for themselves; it is easy to become self-centered and actually think that you yourself are the only person that matters in this world. Really, this is what is wrong with our world today. It is made up of self-centered persons who come first before anyone else or anything else. We are concerned for us first and no one else.

Is your work the center of your life? The man or woman who says, I live to paint pictures, I live to teach children, I live to raise a family, is infinitely better off than the man or woman who says I live my own life in my own way. Moving always from this center, he moves outward, beyond his own immediate needs and interests, to concerns that will never let him rest.

Renoir was one of the French painters of the 19th century who did magical things with flesh tones. He is among the giants. He started as the son of a tailor, and it took him a long time before he realized his ambition and became one of the great painters of France. When he was in his sixties, his hands became so crippled that they could no longer hold the brush, “with brushes strapped to his hands,” writes a commentator, “He continued to paint. He was not to be denied the work that was life itself to him.” So, a man’s work can be the real center of his life.

Or is God the center of your life? What does that mean? That may stutle or stew some of you - even the thought of it! to suggest what it means. Let me take you back to what happened in the lives of the followers of Jesus after he had been killed, and ascended. The followers were forbidden to speak about him in public or to do anything, which might attract attention to him. They did it, nonetheless. Their lives became centered in God, whom they met in Christ. Those lives then had a range that they never had before. There was serenity about them that enabled them to meet anything that came their way without panic. They had confidence that was far more than bravado. They had peace and power. They had what every man has who creates his life in God, life from the deep and from the heights, in the world yet beyond the world.



The followers of Jesus went right on talking about him and working in his name. They were arrested; they were put in jail. By hook or by crook, by prison guard or by guardian angel, they got out of jail, and when the authorities went to find them, they were not there. To their amazement they found them in the temple. When they took them back into the court to put them on trial and then in prison, Peter stood up and said, "We ought to obey God rather than men." That gives you some idea of what it means to center your life on God.

What is life's central fact? God is the central fact. In our existence; apart from him nothing much matters. "The universe owes its origins to him, was created by him, and has its aim and purpose in him"

I know you say it was easier for those first disciples to follow Jesus, to place their life in God. It certainly is not easy for us today to center our lives in God because there are so many other things that we tend to substitute for God.

How can people like us hope to experience anything like that? How can 20th century Americans ever think of centering their lives in God?

No one can tell you exactly how, but begin with some real experiences of God, no matter how slight it may be. No matter when or how this sort of experience comes to a person the essence of it is - and there are things, of course, that we speak about with the greatest hesitation - the essence of it is always the same. It is always a sense of Presence, protecting you, fortifying you; sometimes making great demands upon you, which stir you out of your lethargy, your complacency, and your routine ways of life; always strengthening you. Your life, with its many limitations is invaded by a Life that is infinitely greater than yours, like great seawaters rushing in to fill the little eddies of your life. It is always an experience comparable to the tide coming in, bringing new energies, new visions, new hopes.

You may say, I have never had any experience like that. If you have not, you certainly cannot contrive it; you cannot produce it. But my guess is that most of you have had an experience like that. Though you may not have recognized it. You may not have identified it. You may not have known exactly what it was when it happened. It does not always come in the traditional figures, and not always in the conventional language of religion.

My guess is that you have had somewhere along your way, perhaps more than once, some minor ecstasy, an experience in which you have been carried completely out of yourself, an experience in which you have been, so to speak, invaded by powers infinitely greater than yourself and for a moment, at least, have felt yourself resting in a center that is eternal. Begin with that.

I know that most of us have, at some time in our lives, had the experience or feeling within ourselves that there is a power greater than man that is looking over or protecting us. If you have ever taken a walk in the woods and really stopped long enough to appreciate what surrounds you, you cannot help but realize that

truly God has created everything. I am sure many of us have wondered about what kind of a world this would be if suddenly God stopped looking over us. All of us have had a personal experience in our lives where a tragedy or serious accident has been avoided, and it seems miraculous to us that it was prevented. Many things happen in our lives that we cannot explain. And many of these things are not bad, they are good. Recall one of these experiences and begin with that.

Remember it, go back to it, cultivate it. That is what you do with a human relationship. If you meet someone in whom you recognize greatness or stature or any kind, and feel yourself drawn to him, you may not see him all the time, but you remember him. You think about him, you keep the lines of communication open. You try, as you grow in the relationship, not to do anything that will displease him, not to do anything that will violate the relationship that exists between you and him. Even when you are not thinking about him, he influences you because he has become a part of you.

On a much larger and vaster scale, of course, you do the same thing with God. You meet him as the disciples met him in Christ. For them God and Christ are inseparable, as indeed they are for me. The two are inseparable in Christian experience.

I know from my own experience that God is just waiting to help you. He wants to. There is not a catch to it. It will not cost you anything. I also know that once God does help you, you will start to rely on him more and more. Before you make a decision, you will ask God to help you make it, and he will. Finally, the more and better you come to know God, the more he will be with you, regardless of where you go and what you do, you will take God with you. And you will take God into all your dealings. This, I believe, is how your life can become God centered.

Let us get back to this experience you had in your life, that perhaps you thought was insignificant. However small a fragment of this experience may come to you, you cultivate it. You go back to it, you remember it, you search it out, you feed it, you think about it, you keep the lines of communication open, and you try to do what you think God wants you to do. Even when you are not thinking about him at all, you will find that he is with you, as an invincible Presence, Spirit, who is influencing you, strengthening you, and enabling you to do things otherwise impossible.

Here is a God centered prayer: "Give me a pure heart - that I may see thee, a humble heart - that I may hear thee, a heart of love - that I may serve thee, a heart of faith - that I will abide in thee." Truly, God is willing to give you these things if you want them if you let him.

Many people have said to me that they do not feel that it is Christian to pray to God and ask him for things for their own lives. They say we should only be praying to God to help others. Most definitely we should be asking God to help those that need help, and we should be helping ourselves. But how else can we talk with God if we do not pray to him. How can we become better persons if we do not ask God for his guidance? He and he alone knows what is best for each one of us. He can give us strength – courage -

faith, love and understanding that no human can possibly give us. We should always pray that, “thy will be done,” “not our will.” Actually, if we turn our lives over to God completely, our worries will be over if we live according to God’s will. And regardless of what we are called on to do whether it seems impossible or not, God will help us to do it. We need to have faith in him and then these impossible things become possible. This is how your life can become centered in God. And it really isn’t a dull life, it isn’t a life without happiness and joy, it is a full life and the best kind of life you can live.

What is the center of your life? If you have no center, you are lost. If the center of your life is yourself, you will be miserable and, in the end, alone. If the center of your life is your work, you will be happier and more useful in the world. But if the center of your life is God, you will have the joy and peace that passes a man’s understanding. And you will be living a life that is full of satisfaction. Let God become the center of your life and note the change.

## **Evaluating the Odds**

### **Scripture: I Corinthians 9:19-27**

The text is chosen from 1Corinthians 9:24, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize?”

Paul, on more than one occasion, alluded to the Christian life in terms of an athletic contest. He thought, for example, of the discipline and the desire of the runner engaged in a race. “Do you not know,” he said, “that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize?” Paul was wise enough to know, however, that the prize does not always go to the most talented or the most capable by nature. The tortoise may be very well outstrip the hare. I believe we can refer to a promotion on a job the same way. The one who is promoted is not necessarily the most logical one, or the one that is most capable. Many things are involved, some of which the person looking on from the outside never even considers. In fact, there may be very good reasons why the most capable person does not always get the promotion.

Getting back to athletes - the history of athletes is replete with stories of those who won magnificently even though the odds were all against them. There was Glenn Cunningham, famous mile-er, who as a boy was burned so seriously, he was told he never would be able to walk. It was George Washington Carver, the famous negro, who spoke of “the advantage of disadvantages.” In all logic, he should not have been a distinguished scientist and educator. He should have been unknown, but he turned his disadvantages into advantages, and honored his race by his character and achievement.

The prophets of Israel were men who “came out of great tribulation,” and the Psalmist wrote not against a background of subsidized equality, but out of the depths of harsh struggle with all the odds against them. Who was Peter? He was a big fisherman, involved in the struggle to win some substance from the sea, an ordinary man nobody would expect to win any prizes on earth. Realist would have said all the dice were loaded against him. But somehow, in the providence of God, ordinary men like the prophets and Peter and the disciples stood head and shoulders above their contemporaries in spite of the odds.

Some years ago, a movement was started in England to induce the government to provide small endowments for young writers of promise so that they could develop their talents instead of having to spend most of their time earning and living. That, thought the exponents of the idea, would make the race more equal. But Thomas Hardy was one of those who opposed the plan on the ground that this would defeat the very ends of literature. Great literature, through the centuries, he said, has come out of great struggle, and the highest flights of the pen often haven’t resulted from the excursion of souls involved in life and its tragedy. I believe this is very true. Most of us have had to learn things the hard way. We have all had our hard knocks and most of us are thankful for them. We have learned to appreciate what life is and what it is all about. But those of us who have accepted Jesus Christ into our lives have found that life is much more meaningful and that we do have the power to do things that otherwise would have gone undone. We have found ourselves better prepared to take the hard knocks in life and to bounce back stronger than ever.

I'm sure that even though at times we might feel it would be nice to have things easier and handed to us on a silver platter, we really and truly are happy and glad that we have had to struggle. I'm sure this struggle has made better persons of each one of us. Many times, individuals set out to do things, even though the odds are against them because they believe it is right and generally they are able to get their point across and usually bring it to a successful conclusion.

Paul put his finger on one aspect of the triumph of the ordinary when he wrote, "Every athlete exercises self-discipline in all things." Races are not won merely by initial talent. They are won by discipline and incessant training. The athlete is quite unwilling to leave things to chance, to settle for things half done. In the Christian context of Paul's message, nothing is good enough for God except the best man do, no matter what it cost. There was genius, we say, in the great addresses of Winston Churchill during the war years, but his secretary says the great address that steered the world, sometimes were written nine times before they were delivered. They were the result of disciplined preparation and hard work.

One can only guess what disciplined thought, preparation, and hard work went into the messages of Jesus. I believe it is true with anything that is worthwhile, and anything that stirs people's heart, that plenty of hard work has gone into it before it is presented. And if it hasn't, I'm afraid it isn't going to be of much value to anyone. I'm sure if we look at such a person's life, it is real disciplined on the number of hours spent, each day, what reference material is read, etc. If we apply the same concept to our spiritual lives, I'm sure our rewards will far exceed anything we can imagine. Let us consider ourselves spirited athletes. And live our lives as though we were in training for a race.

In 1 Timothy 4:7, we read, "Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths. Train yourself in godliness." Our spiritual training is important not only for ourselves but for helping others. We need to keep spiritual fit for the life that is to come after death. Our purpose as Christians on this earth is to bring others into a personal relationship with God, thus making the world a better place in which to live. Our reward will be eternal life with God, our Father. And so, ours become a disciplined life in which we do not waste our time and our lives on trivial things. Today there are many things that can take up our spare time if we allow them to. We need to get back to reading our Bibles and praying with our Lord and start letting some of the other things go by the wayside. I know we will never get to these things unless we discipline ourselves and start living our lives as the Christians we profess to be. For I know you cannot be a Christian without reading the Bible and talking with God.

Paul's faith never lost touch with life because, as he said, "I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air." Quite the contrary, he ran for what he called an "imperishable wreath", for the sake of the Gospel. He lived under the discipline of preparation and hard work as one dedicated to "the high calling of God, which is in Jesus Christ." There is little point to discipline, preparation, and hard work unless we are moving towards some "imperishable wreath."

In other words, what purpose do we have for living? Why do we raise a family? For what purpose? We

all need a goal, a clear goal, set before us. A Christian's goal is eternal life. What is your goal? Perhaps your goal is to become a millionaire, but what good is it? If after you have made it, the Lord says to you, "Tonight your soul is required of you." You can't take it with you. We need to think of these things in our daily living and not just here in this building on Sunday morning. How about that business deal? That wasn't exactly on the up and up. What was your purpose or goal in that? How about the snooty way you treated your neighbor yesterday? What did you have in mind? How about the other day when you called your boss to tell him you were sick when you were not? What did you have in mind? What was your purpose in living? I think we need to think before we act. You know there is a vast difference between the lawyer trying to win a case by hook or by crook, and the lawyer expressing his faith by his devotion to an imperishable justice.

Who can measure the gulf between the student meandering through four years of college because it seems to thing to do, and the student ardently pursuing knowledge and insight in order that he may approve the things that are excellent? What kinship is there between the businessman resolved to make a profit by fair means or foul, and the businessman committed to an ideal of integrity that is abiding? I believe you know the answers to these questions. The great apostle concluded by saying, "I pummel or bruise my body and subdue it." Obviously, he was a hard taskmaster demanding of himself what nobody else had a right to demand. He was quite willing to deny himself what he wanted in order to give what Christ wanted of him. In the light of his past, his violent moods, his hatred for the Christians, there was considerable pummeling to be done.

There are very few of us today that are willing to deny ourselves anything, regardless of whether it's for Christ or not. We come first and then we'll consider others and our Lord. Sometimes we start feeling sorry for ourselves, we say I've worked hard all year, I believe I deserve a new car, a new set of clothes or whatever else we want. Do we ever say, "Lord, you have been good to me and my family this year, I'm going to give you a 10th of every dollar I earn." Some of us would say that is ridiculous. But it is really ridiculous? Stop and think that God has given us everything we have, even the air we breathe. It is he who has allowed us to work and earn a living for our families. Don't you think we should give back a portion of what we have gained, to our Lord's work? When the day comes that we ourselves feel we are responsible for our success and good fortune, then I'm afraid we are lost and really do not have a clear cut goal before us and our spiritual training has taken a back seat.

Paul pummeled his body, his pride, and his temper, his unworthy instincts because he felt responsible for the gospel of his Lord. He was resolved not to give a false impression of the meaning of his faith by behaving in a fashion unworthy of it. He used himself greatly in the service of the Lord's Kingdom and ran the race dedicated to the imperishable values, he saw in the spirit and mind of Jesus Christ.

There is a little church in Missouri with a motto that used to be in a sign in front of the sanctuary and on the Sunday bulletin. It read: "We believe that the power behind us is greater than the task in front of us."

Indeed, the power behind us is immeasurable. None of us are perfect, but as Christians we believe that

Christ will show us the way, He will help us to live our lives according to God's will. Establish your goal in life according to God's will and then run the race that is set before you with perseverance. And regardless of the odds, with Christ with you, you cannot lose.

## **God Gives Us Men**

### **Scripture: Mark 10:35-45**

Text is from Mark 10: 43 & 44; “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” In these demanding days in which we live, there are many issues on which we have disagreement. There is health in this because there is a value in the antagonism of ideas. But I think there is one thing on which we will all agree and agree almost unanimously: that there is need for able men-men of integrity, men of vision, and men of intelligence, who are ever seeking to improve their lives and the world in which they live.

God give us men! The time demands strong minds, great hearts, true faith and willing hands. Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy; men who have honor; men who will not lie; men who can stand before a demagogue and scorn his treacherous flatteries without winking; tall men, sun crowned, who live above the fog. In public duty and in private thinking.

Indeed, there is a tremendous need of these kind of people in our world today.

All of us know that one illustration is worth thousand words, therefore, I desire to illustrate what I have to say through the life of a man of whom most of us think highly. His birthday anniversary is today. I refer, of course, to Abraham Lincoln.

Let us think about Lincoln this morning around these three ideas: first - Lincoln kept a growing edge. His success was not accidental. It was not the time in which he was born that made him. It cannot be said of him that “he got the brakes.”

Perhaps some of us do seem to get more breaks in life than others, but I firmly believe that you have to take advantage of the opportunity when it is there. I’ve heard it said that opportunity knocks, but it never walks in by itself until you open the door.

In education, Lincoln was a development, not an accident. When he went to Congress, the only time he was elected to Congress, in 1846, he was requested to fill out a paper. Opposite “education”, he wrote “defective.” That required a great deal of honesty. I wager that he was the only congressman or senator that ever put that on his information sheet opposite “education”. He knew his education was defective and in that was his strength. He had only about 12 months of formal schooling.

It is wonderful to consider “where else in this world a man could rise from nothing to the presidency but in the United States of America”. Opportunity is always there for us if we are willing to accept it.

Consider Lincoln’s library. He had only a few books in it. You may say it’s a poor library. Let us see. One book was the Bible, and he knew its contents - 66 books bound up in one volume. Another one was



Robinson Crusoe, a great adventure tale; another, parts of Shakespeare; “Aesop’s Fables”, where he in part, got the ability to tell a story and tell it well; Pilgrim’s Progress; Weems, “Life of Washington”, and a history of the US Herndon, his law partners in Springfield, made this profound remark: “Lincoln read less and thought more than any man I ever knew.” Later on, Lincoln had in his library that great tale of imagination, “Arabian Nights,” and a half dozen law books. A better library than many of us may have.

Add forty, he came across the word “demonstrate”, and we are told, and I think it is an authentic incident, that he went through five books of Euclid, that is plain geometry, where at the end of every proposition you have Q.E.D., that which is to be demonstrated. Lincoln contended that no man is able to talk well, unless first of all, he defines what he is talking about.

He trained himself by reading books on law and trying to think through every statement he read. But in Cincinnati he ran up against an Eastern lawyer who was logically trained. After the trial, he told his client, Ralph Emerson - at 50 years of age, mark it! “I’m going back to Illinois to study law.” When you are 50, did you or will you say that about your profession? I doubt it very much. Have that question in your minds. The growth principle, the idea of “the growing edge”, is important to everyone. Lincoln kept the growing edge.

His religion was a growth. Lincoln, largely because of the reversals and sorrows in his early life, became a fatalist, then an agnostic, and then through many a struggle he won through to a religious faith. He knew his Bible; he prayed! He said that he fell on his knees because he didn’t know any other place to go. If any man falls on his knees humbly, then that man rises from them a stronger man. His faith in God, in the Bible, and in prayer made him a man of “vision plus valor.” He knew that religion was not alone, revealed, wonderful as it is in the Bible, but that it was also an experimental religion.

Lincoln made his religion, something firsthand. True religion must be ground out of your own experience, as you test and retest it in the light of God’s truth and love.

Too many of us are living in the shadows of our parents or grandparents experience. They were good Christian people, so I’m expected to be one also. I really haven’t had a true experience in my own life, but I know how it must feel for they told me many times. If we think this kind of experience is good enough for us, we are mistaken. For the Christian, experience comes to each one of us individually, and it really cannot be appreciated until it has been experienced. If you haven’t had one yet, keep praying for I know God will touch you. Then, and only then, will your religion become meaningful and more than a hand-me-down or second handed sort of thing.

Secondly, Lincoln’s life could have been correctly called. “the biography of a failure”. Lincoln was a man of failure, but he wouldn’t stay failed. Too many of us go down to defeat, never again to rise. We admit we are licked, and we give up. Actually, we have to stand up and fight; never. Admitting defeat. That, in the end, is what is important. Let us look at Lincoln’s record. He failed in business in 1831. He was defeated

for the state Legislature in 1833. He again failed in business in 1833. He was elected to the Legislature in 1834. He was defeated as Speaker in 1838. He was defeated for Congress in 1843. He was elected to Congress in 1846. He was defeated for Congress in 1848. He was defeated for the Senate in 1855. He was defeated for the vice presidency in 1856. He was defeated for the Senate when he ran against Douglas in 1850. He was elected president in 1860. Re-elected to the presidency in 1864.

He believed that men “men rise upon steppingstones of their ‘dead’ selves to higher things,” and that, “defeat may serve as well as victory to try the soul and let the spirit out.”

Any ordinary man would have given up after the first or second defeat, but not Abraham Lincoln, a man of persistence, a man who apparently set a goal for himself and obtained it. We can most definitely grow from our past experiences and one of defeat is perhaps more valuable than one of success. “A man can grow” - Thank God a man can grow. He is not bound to creep along the ground, though his beginnings be but small and low, thank God a man can grow.

Thirdly, Lincoln’s cause was impartial justice.

His justice was truth. Back in 1858 in Springfield, IL, Lincoln made a speech entitled, “A House Divided Against Itself.” In it, he contended that “a nation cannot long endure half slave and half free.” Some of his friends came to him and said, “You mustn’t repeat that speech - if you do, you’ll lose votes.” Here is Lincoln’s reply. “If it should be decreed that I go down to defeat because of the speech, then we go down linked with truth. Linked with truth! That’s it.

Here are a few lines from Edwin Markham’s “Abraham Lincoln, A Man of the People.”

“He held his place, held to a long purpose like a growing tree; held on, through blame and fault, and not of praise, and when he fell, he went down, as when a lordly cedar green with bows - goes down with a great shout upon the hills - and leaves a lonesome place against the sky.”

During his first term as President, when he refused to pass out spoils to some of his friends, he said: “I desire so to conduct the affairs of this nation that if I love every friend on Earth, I shall have one friend left - and that is the friend down inside me.”

Here are the guiding principles for America and the world! God gives us men. Lincoln-hearted and Lincoln-minded men. “Tall men seem crowned, who live above the fog in public duty and in private thinking.”

Truly we have an example of the past to live by.

It just so happens that Abraham Lincoln’s birthday this year is the first Sunday of Lent. Lincoln is primarily associated with freedom - his “Emancipation Proclamation”, that freed the slaves.

As I said before, Lincoln said, “A nation cannot exist half slave and half free.” I think perhaps after over 100 years, some of America has really come to believe this. But again, genuine freedom depends upon the ascending of spiritual values. From the Gospel of John 8:36 we read, “ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Lent is a season of 40 days preceding Easter, not counting Sundays. The date of Easter falls on the Sunday after the full moon after the vernal equinox, a time determined by the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. Lent has been celebrated by Christians, at least from the 2nd century. The word Lent is from the Anglo-Saxon *Lecten*, meaning spring. For centuries it has been observed as a period for deepening the devotional life of faithful Christians, looking forward to the joyous triumphant of Easter; the victory of spirit over matter, of life over death, of God’s creative and receiving love over the worst that human hate and blindness can do.

Lent then is a season of spiritual adventure. The Master in the wilderness forgot even about the staff of physical life - bread, by which man surely lives. Why? Because he was keen about quest - the adventure - of God. So, then, we enter the season of Lent, not to discipline ourselves by fasting, and not to make ourselves like him by imitating his discipline, but to make our great adventure into the depths of God’s being and our own, and incidentally, only incidentally, do we find ourselves giving up this thing and letting go that - our time, our selfish vanities, our very food itself. Why? All because we are keen about the quest, the quest of God.

Therefore, the Lenten season, which emphasizes the spiritual values, which Jesus incarnated. Has very direct relationship to freedom and the one who properly earned the title, “the Great Emancipator.”

It was Lincoln who said, “I am not so much concerned as to whether God is on my side, as I am on God’s side.” During Lent, we are especially challenged by the life of Jesus to be “on God side.” And we can be on God’s side through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Make this Lenten season meaningful; think about these things, make your life more meaningful and purposeful; become the Christian God wants you to be.

#### Invocation

God of history, God of our day, and God of the future, lift us up, that we may have fellowship with thee, with one another, and with those who have gone before us. By holding and remembrance the lives of famous people, may we ourselves become stronger and more righteous people; better able to bear the burdens and meet the responsibilities of our day. In Jesus name, Amen.

#### Words of Assurance

“Trust in the Lord; wait patiently for him; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.”

#### Pastoral prayer

Oh Lord, our God, who rules the world from end to end, and whose will is the good of all thy sons and daughters under the sun, look in mercy upon us as we raise our prayers to thee for this good land in which

our law is cast through thy kindly Providence. Our father, we praise thee for all noble souls who, in their day of and generation did give themselves to the call of liberty and freedom, counting their own lives not dear, but giving all devotion to establish a land in the fear of the Lord. We thank thee for those whom thou hast raised up in the nation's history to defend our liberties and to lead the people to a wider sense of justice. We thank thee for those who believed this country could be an instrument of thy will as a beacon light and a haven of refuge in a troubled world. Grant, O God, that as we hold them in memory, we may have a renewed devotion to those causes which make for righteousness and peace. Our father, bless the high church and especially the people of our congregation. Putting our differences aside, may we push on to make thy word known and heard in our community. May we set a good Christian example for all people in the community. Bless the sick, the lonely and depressed, the bereaved, the ones with special problems as we raise them to you this morning. In our minds, help them to feel your presence and give them a peace and calm never before felt. Bless our Sunday school and all those who work to make it an important part of our church program. Give each of us the courage, faith, and strength we need to endure. In Jesus name, Amen.

## **God is Available**

### **Scripture: Luke 15:11-32**

Text is chosen from Luke 15:18, "I will arise and go to my father."

Available might well be considered a dreadful word to use with reference to God. Available means usable, at one's disposal. Light is available in my home and in yours, by flicking a switch. Water is available by turning a faucet. We have many services at our disposal by the use of gadgets.

The fact of the matter is some people use God as a gadget. They have an urgent need, and they try to satisfy it by pushing the God button. They come into one of life's darkrooms and in their need for light they seek to make a quick connection with God. Sometimes they do it by telephone, by dialing a prayer. Call the right number; it sets off a recorded prayer; connection with God is made; and that's that. This is possible now in many American cities. You ask, "Does it work?" This is a natural question. The question is asked exactly as one asked concerning the operation of a gadget. The answer is no, God is not a gadget and I suppose these people cannot understand why their prayers are not answered. Actually, they are thoughts because they really never do pray to God, they let someone else do that for them. The first thing we have to remember about our Christianity is that it is an individual religion even though in Christian fellowship, we worship our Lord together. God is concerned for each of us individually and what we feel in our hearts and think in our minds. We can never expect anyone else to do our praying for us, not even through the use of gadgets, which we have plenty of nowadays. If God then is not available through gadgets, how is he available? Jesus' parable of the prodigal son may inform us. See the young man reduced to feeding swine and sharing the husk that the swine did eat. He was in sad condition, and he knew it. He had to learn the hard way, by experience. It was then he said, "I will arise and go to my father."

"My father." There was no button to push; there was a relationship to restore and immediately realize. "My father!" "My father" the person of his father, was not there, but the relationship was there. He knew that his father's fatherhood was available. His father was still his father. No matter how he had wasted his life thus far, he was still his father's son. What comfort the thought gave him! What new energy was given him! He was able to say, "I will arise." - "I will go." The fatherhood of his father was available while the son was still far from home.

Who really is the father in this parable? He is the picture of God, the most winsome picture ever drawn on Earth! This parable is the heart of the gospel. God is eager to forgive utterly, and to restore. For there is no forgiveness except utter forgiveness. Two "forgive but not forget" is to refuse to forgive. And there is no forgiveness that does not restore. When clever sciences have been forgotten, when all other stories pall, when the earth waxes old, like a garment, this story will still be young. It will still have power to entangle our raveled life. It will still win us to our hearts true home.

So many of us need to know, whatever our condition or need, that God's fatherhood is always available

to all his children.

And truly it is available if we really and truly are sincere and want it. Perhaps we will not always get what we think we want for ourselves, but he will give us what is best for us and according to his will for our lives. It is important for us to realize we need to place our whole lives in God's hands and not hold anything back. He will take care of us. And he does love us. From 1 John 3.:1 we read, "See what love the father has given us." Only on the basis of this gift, (God's gift of Christ) do we know how limitless and unconditional is the love of God; only upon it can we say with complete trust in spite of our sinfulness: God is still my father, I am still his child.

What turn in life brings a prodigal's return to this son relationship? The parable tells us that "when he came to himself" he began to think of the father against whom he had rebelled and whose house he had deserted. It was his father's influence from afar that turned his mind and heart and will homeward. He suddenly realized where he really belonged. We quote Helmut Thielicke: "It was not because the far country made him sick that he turned back home. It was rather that the consciousness of home disquieted him with the far country, actually made him realize what estrangement and lostness is.

I know that many of us parents become concerned with our teenage children because they seem to lose interest in church and Sunday school. They often do not want to attend unless they are forced. We wonder what has happened to them and what will become of them? Naturally, we all would like to see our young people in church and Sunday school, but I do not believe you can force them to attend. It certainly is up to us adults to make sure there is enough interest to keep them here. Beyond that, we as parents can live our lives as living examples for them and pray to God that someday, they will see the light and come back to church. I'm sure they will see if they are brought up in the right environment, just as the prodigal son in our parable this morning.

However, our interest in this sermon is not so much the children of the prodigal, but the character of the Father. The ultimate theme in this parable is not the prodigal son, but the father who finds us.

The father never lost interest in his son; he grieved, of course; he waited; he was ready to receive him back. How many of us fathers would be willing to do the same in similar circumstances? And still God, our father, is more than willing to take us back and receive us. The Prodigal's father was faithful in his fatherhood. That faithfulness made him available. At any moment, the prodigal can say, "I will arise and go to my father," and follow the decision with the act.

One of the saddest letters in all literature is a letter written to by a Scotch poet, David Gray. David Gray was born 8 miles from Glasgow. His honest father would have made a preacher of him, but God forestalled that by making him a poet. Well, nothing would satisfy David, but he must go to London. He suffered much there and fell into corruption and this is one of the last letters home: "Torquay, January 6, 1861. Dear parents, I am coming home - homesick. I cannot stay from home any longer. What's the good of me,

being so far from home and sick and ill? Oh God! I wish I were home never to leave it! I wish I were home never to leave it! Tell everybody that I am coming back, - no better, worse, worse. What's about climate, frost or snow or cold weather? When one's at home? I wish I had never left it. I have no money, and I want to get home, home, home. What shall I do, Oh, God! Father, I Shall. I wish I were home never to leave it! Stick to you again, because I did not use you rightly. Well, you will you forgive me? Do I ask that? I have come through things that would make your hearts ache for me. Things that I shall never tell anybody. But you and you shall keep them secret. As the grave, get my own little room ready. Quick, quick; have it all tidy and clean, and cozy, against my homecoming. I wish to die there, and nobody shall nurse me except my own dear mother, ever, ever again. Oh, home, Home, Home!"

I will arise and go to my Father. Thank God we need no money for that journey.

Parents probably never know what this father and son relationship is until it happens in their own family. It is the same relationship that we have with our Father, God. It cannot be explained in words but must be felt by the persons involved.

The elder brother's attitude in this parable sets us thinking. He dwelt in his father's house and never left it. And yet his complaint suggests that he never really related unto his father's fatherhood. His livelihood was accepted from his father's hand, but did he ever ask his father for any gift? Did he ever enter into his father's interests and purposes? Did he ever give thanks? Did he ever share his father's concern for his brother? Did he ever say "my brother?" In verse 30, he said, "thy son of yours," not "my brother." His father was available to meet his every need. His father was always nearby. How many of us live like the elder brother in this parable? I am afraid too many of us live this way; selfish, unforgiving, greedy, anxious to have others leave so we can have everything for ourselves, secretly hoping that our brother or sister doesn't return, that they get lost somewhere. You could argue that the elder brother was the steady one. He did not want to leave home and look for greener pastures. He was satisfied to remain at home and do the work. But I believe in all his faithfulness toward his father and home, he forgot, or perhaps he never knew the meaning of true brotherhood and forgiveness but could only think of himself and how faithful a son he had been.

Finally, the availability of God is witnessed in Jesus' practice of prayer. We know that he met the sudden energizing by prayer. From Mark 9: 29, we read of Jesus healing of a boy from a dumb serpent and after the spirit had left him. He lay still and cold as if dead. But Jesus was able to take him by the hand and he arose. The disciples asked why they could not cast out the spirit and Jesus replied, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." We know that he withdrew from his disciples to be alone in prayer. We know that he taught his disciples to pray - "The Lord's Prayer". Does this not argue for the availability of God? Christians know that God is available through honest and sincere prayer. Many have had this exciting experience of talking face to face with God.

We do not know and cannot know God in all his greatness. That is beyond us. But we can know that God's

fatherhood is available to his children. A prodigal can return. An indifferent and surly fellow, like the elder brother, may sometime day learn to know God as his father. Blessed are those who practice the availability of God in prayer.

God is available - the word "available" does not satisfy us. Shall we say, "God is available because he is faithful? Or simply, "God is our loving father?"



## **Granite Certainties**

### **Scripture: Exodus 3: 11-15**

Text is chosen from 100th Psalm, verse 5; “For the Lord is good; His steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Think for a moment of the recent transformations in the way people live. The great danger in all this is not in the changes themselves. The danger is that people will think that everything is changing, and so will lose their hold on their life-sustaining certainties that have never changed and never will.

Because everything seems uncertain, young people especially are finding it hard to plan very far ahead. Today’s science is tomorrow’s fallacy. What is modern changes overnight. Fashions in morals and philosophy seem as undependable as fashions in art and housing. What these young people need to know is that, with all the swift cinema of surface shifting deep down underneath the things that make life good have never changed.

The content that makes life worthwhile stays the same. Basic human needs and human nature have not changed very much.

We read Plato not to find out what people used to be, but to find out what they still are. Or go back over three thousand years ago to Akhenaten, the Egyptian pharaoh. The reason he set down for believing in God and one wife pretty well states the case for modern minds. He had never seen an automobile, but he had a very modern view of love and worship.

Beauty, they say of the nightingale will have the same effect on listeners tonight that it had on Queen Badroulbadoir in the garden long ago.

Shakespeare is still the world’s greatest dramatist, not because he is so ancient, but because he is so modern. We are fascinated by the development of love and malice, of ambition and folly in his plays, because we are watching the drama of ourselves.

Not only do the things that make life good remain the same, so also do the laws by which it is governed. There is really nothing new in science; The only progress is in finding out what has always been there. Electricity is as old as Jove’s thunderbolts. Atomic Power was the primal state from which the universe was born. The caveman needed vitamins.

There have been no amendments to the basic moral laws. So called cultural and scientific progress has not made free love a bit less foolish than it was one thousand years ago.

A prominent American’s disregard of his marriage vows made headlines all over the country. The scandal broke in Europe and the reporters met him to get a statement when his ship docked in New York. What he

said was, "Well, boys, after all, this is the 20th century." That is the old moralities do not count anymore. We are living in an era of rapid change. No doubt as the ship crossed the Atlantic, the surface of the ocean was in constant change. But the captain never tried to find his way by the shifting pattern of the wind and waves. He used the things that never changed to steer by and brought his vessel safely into port.

A contemptible ox cart driver would be no less contemptible in supersonic plane.

That is why the Bible is perpetually modern. The laws for the soul's health which it sets forth have not been outmoded. The ways that make a man a man, and the ways that ruin him, are just what they were when David's heart was broken for his sin, or when poor faithless Peter went weeping out into the darkness. The ways that make a nation strong, and the ways that lead to national security are just what they were when the Hebrew nation traced its wavering line between righteousness and sin across the pages of the Bible's history.

The poison that was used by the murdering Borgias, in Medieval Italy, is supposed to have an interesting quality. It was a white, tasteless powder, and the precise time of the victim's death, it is said, could be determined by the amount of poison that was given. The formula, fortunately, has been lost. But we cannot doubt that if it was rediscovered, it would have exactly the same effect on bodies today that it had on them hundreds of years ago.

And so do other poisons of the Borgias - their hatred and lust and greed. They have exactly the same effect on humans lives that they have always had. There is not a soul of moral physiology whose working's do not change.

In a time of rapid change, this sort of changelessness seems incredible. We have come to expect everything to be relative and shifting. Yet in the midst of all that is whirling around us, there are granite certainties to which our lives may be moored. What is the source of this fixity? How do we explain it?

The Bible puts the changeless amid the changing in a tremendous statement, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or even thou hadst formed the earth and the whole world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God."

This is one of the granite or solid certainties we can always be sure of, God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. We may change and we do, but God never changes. If we become confused (and we certainly do now-a-days) or start off in the wrong direction we can always back up and start with God again for he will always be there.

God is the eternal. Present tense. That is what distinguishes him. He has no past and no future. He is the eternal. "I am".

The New Testament calls God. “The father of lights with whom there is no variability or shadow due to change.” He is the source of those dependabilities on which we count forever. Jesus Christ is the Lord and master for all generations, because, as the Bible says, he is “the same yesterday and today and forever.”

This is assurance that we are living on. Granite certainties is not a bulwark for conservatives; it does not impose conformity. Its effect may be just the opposite. The radicals are often those who appeal to the centuries. Against their generation. The brave and solitary individual, maybe one who stands for the timeless. Against all the in opportunities of his time. Modern man may feel his individuality imperiled by big institutions which dominate his life - big business, big labor, big government. Modernity is tyranny in many ways. We are under constant pressure to be manipulated, to conform our morals and our taste to what today’s society demands. We can still survive as free and human beings if we keep our firm hold on those realities that are independent of fashions and fanaticisms.

A brilliant teacher of an economics at Harvard, a man who is not a member of any church, closed his last lecture with the college year by saying, “gentlemen, after all, there is only one solution of our tangled economic problems, only one way out of our difficulties. And that way was laid down in the teachings of a young Jewish Carpenter 20 centuries ago. When men will apply his principles to the economic struggle, we shall solve our major problems.”

Yes, I truly believe we will solve more than economic problems, but any kind of problem we have. It’s so simple and I believe that’s why so many people overlook the solution to life itself. Jesus Christ is waiting for us. He is patient, loving, kind, understanding. All we need to do is to give ourselves to him. Turn our lives over to him completely and he will take care of us. Oh, we will have problems, but I guarantee we will be able to come up with a solution, where before, we would have given up.

Perhaps you think I’m kidding, or that I’m out of my mind. Well, you have a right to think what you want, but you’ll never know until you do it.

The knowledge that we are basing life on granite certainties is of urgently practical importance. For one thing, it gives us a working knowledge of the future. We will know what to expect from God. Second - the consciousness of permanence gives us moral certainty. What is the principle of perseverance? The chemist can go to sleep knowing that the atomic weights will be just the same when he wakes up. The great foundations for right marriage have not changed. They are the same today as they were centuries ago. Third - it gives us a knowledge of the rules. When James Russell Lowell saw certain printers getting into shady practices, he blazed in anger: “In vain we call old notions fudge and bend our conscience to our dealing; The 10 Commandments will not budge, and stealing will continue stealing.” It’s strange, isn’t it? That most people would not think of taking anything from a store without paying for it. But the place where they work seems to be different. But doesn’t it all boil down to the same thing, stealing? Another thing seems rather strange; we all admit we are living in a world that is constantly changing and that things are really different than they were in granddad’s day. At least we use this for an excuse for our

actions sometimes, but in spite of all this, we still are men of greed, selfishness, hatred, lust, for we are still fighting and having wars the same as the men of Old Testament times. So, when we boil it all down, we really haven't changed as much as everyone claims.

It is obvious, of course, that all of this has been stressing one side of a two-sided matter. The whole truth is often found in the tension between two poles of a paradox. We specially need in a time of rapid change to get a firm hold of those things that never change. But the fact remains that there are some important things that are changing very much. We need only to look in our mirrors to be convinced of that.

I sometimes get help in the practical dealing with this dilemma by thinking of a railroad train. The reason a train can move is that the tracks do not move. As long as the flying wheels keep a purchase on the stationary rails, the train is safe. If we can keep a firm hold on things that never change, it does not matter how fast a time of rapid change hurries us along, we still can be secure.

Please do not get the impression that I am opposed to change, for I am not. I am subject to change daily in my work. I have come to realize I must accept it. Sometimes the change is for the better, sometimes it is worse, but at any rate it is change, it is different, and we must adjust to it. But we do not have to change our beliefs, our principles, or our attitudes to something we know shall always be a part of us and live forever. We have to be able to pick these things out and to stand by them to the end. Because everyone, or nearly everyone, has come to accept social drinking as a must doesn't mean that I have to accept it or participate in it. For I do not believe it to be a necessity to living my life, the way God would have me live it.

When the Bedouins cross the desert, they usually follow old camel tracks. But sometimes in mid-course they will be caught by a sandstorm. When they raise their heads and look around the trail may be obliterated, and the very landscape is changed, so that where there was a hill before is now a valley. But those desert men are not lost, they simply wait for the nighttime and find their way by the eternal stars.

If you feel lost and bewildered by all the changes that these modern times have brought, go out of doors tonight. Look above you and see your path still marked across the sky. Keep a hold on those things that will never change, back up and start from there again.

## **Inside Information About God**

### **Scripture. Acts 17: 16–34**

Text is chosen from Acts 17: 28; “In him, we live and move and have our being.” There are a lot of people who do not believe in God. Many of them are good people and they are not to be criticized, much less, condemned, for their unbelief. These are years in which many things confine us, and for some, the idea of God adds to the confusion. Then, 2, There are some people who attend church services and go through the motions of worship, while in fact they have lost the reality of God.

That’s why I do not especially like it when people say that attending church becomes a habit. Admittedly, it is a good habit, but God help us if it isn’t more than a habit. Within us, we should have the feeling that I must be in my Lord’s house to worship him, because I want to. If we come to church merely as a habit, I’m afraid we obtain very little from the worship service.

Paul, in his address to the Athenians, must have been facing an audience, some of whom did not believe in God, or, as he notes, were worshipping the unknown God. In his clear statement of the Christian viewpoint, he used the words of our text concerning God: “In him we live, and move, and have our being.” If that is true, living and moving and having our being in him should provide us with much inside information concerning God.

Here is what L.P. Jacks has to say about the knowledge of God otherwise than by hearsay; “Here is what a plain man once said to me: “I was standing on my own hearthstone warning myself at the fire and thinking of unimportant things. Presently, my meditations took another turn for some reason or another. I became acutely conscious of the firm support I had on the solid ground beneath my feet. How well the hearthstone bore my weight! And how efficiently the heat of the fire was warming me. Then suddenly it occurred to me that the whole universe was a vastly expanded hearthstone, supporting the existence of everything, just as the Hearthstone supported my body at that moment; that all the forces were like the fire that was warming me, sources of sustenance, not for me alone, but for all created things. Here was I standing on my own hearthstone, upheld, as it were, by the everlasting arms, and I knew what the psalmist meant when he said: thou art my rock.” That is knowledge of God otherwise than by hearsay.

That’s why I firmly believe that I can stand here for years telling of God, Jesus Christ and how you should accept him into your lives. But all the words really mean very little until you have experienced Christ and God, yourselves in your own lives. Believe me, I know what God can do for your life, and this is what I try each week to tell you.

There are many ways we can acquire inside information concerning God. First of all, by living in God’s world, we acquire inside information concerning him.

Too often we live in a narrow and circumscribed world. Have you not known men who seldom if ever

stepped outside the world of business? Many live only in the world of pleasure. The world of sports claim some. There are so many little worlds in which we live and move; and some not so little. For example, the family and its interest, philosophy, science.

Suppose we make even a feeble attempt to live in God's world. What information might we gather concerning him?

We would learn that God is far greater than our little conception of him. In these days we think of the great "cosmic universe." How can a man live in that without a sense of mystery and awe, which convince him that God is a great God?

We learn something about God by living in God's world of beauty. This is inside information most difficult and really unnecessary to express in words. The soul of man, played upon by a landscape, a flower, birdsong, or a star has knowledge which cannot be comprehended by a word or phrase.

If we really appreciate the beauty around us, we cannot but help know and realize where this all comes from. For truly, God is the creator of everything that surrounds us.

Speaking of living in God's world; John Muir of the Yosemite was "red blooded and intensely masculine; a mystic, yet a realist with his feet on the ground." he has been called "the real father of the forest reservations of America" and "the grandest character in National Park history." If ever a man lived in God's world, it was John Muir. Here are two quotations from his diary: "June 23, 1869. Oh, these vast, measureless mountain days, inciting at once to work and rest. Days in whose light everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God. Nevermore, however weary, should one faint by the way who gains the blessings of one mountain day; whatever his fate, long life, short life, stormy or calm, he is rich forever."

And this was written after a day on the North Dome: "These blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God's beauty no petty personal hope or experience has room to be. Perched like a fly on this Yosemite Dome, I gaze and sketch and bask, oftentimes settling down into dumb admiration without definite hope of learning much, yet with the longing, unresting effort that lies at the door of hope, humbly prostrate before the vast display of God's power and eager to offer self-denial and reunification, with eternal toil, to learn any lesson in the divine Manuscript. A fruitful day-a terrestrial eternity. A gift of the good God."

I'm sure you would agree with John Muir if you have personally seen Yosemite. We were there a few years ago and what God has created is breathtaking and unbelievable. We truly can learn something about God by living in God's world of beauty.

Living in God's world, we know that God is a God of order and law. Sunrises and sunsets are not by accident. We can find no place, whether in outer space or in the heart of man, where his order and law are

not in evidence.

God is also inescapable. Although it remains true that God will never force our hands or overpower our wills, yet this is his world in which we live and move and have our being. In that sense, God is quite inescapable.

Secondly - we acquire inside information concerning God by living under his grace. A newspaper commentator recently criticized the use of the word “grace” as being a religious cliché. It is not a cliché. There are many who do not know or understand its meaning. The grace of God is God’s free favor toward us. By his favor, that is by his grace, we have life itself.

By the acceptance of God’s grace, by living a life of thankful acceptance, we gather much information about God. We can express our findings in simple terms: God is kind, God is compassionate, God is forgiving, God is love. As Christians we are all living under the grace of God and therefore should show forth this same feeling toward our fellow men. I firmly believe we do live, and move, and have our being only through the grace of God. The sooner we can come to realize this, the closer we will be to God, and the sooner we will come to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, which of course is the main objective to the Christian religion.

Thirdly - we receive much information concerning God by engaging in his service. We learn that God is purposeful. The wide scope of God’s purpose we may not be able to define, but we know that our own works and witness are related to his ongoing purposes. It is his Kingdom we seek.

We have awareness of his spiritual presence. Missionaries who serve in difficult and dangerous fields testified to the experience of the presence of God. No less do men who find trade or business a meaning, a means of advancing God’s Kingdom, or housewives who build Christian homes. The presence of God is given to those who serve him.

We really do not need to be missionaries or ministers, to feel the presence of God; for God truly is present in our lives, always, regardless of where we are or what we are doing. Have you had this most thrilling experience?

Engaged in his service, men learn that God is powerful. A missionary facing a difficult task in the heart of Africa cried out, “I cannot do it alone.” But he did it! God was in that situation before him. Not only was God present with him, but he was also his servant’s source of power. This missionary came out of the jungle with great inside information concerning the presence and the power of God. God’s power is experienced as men attempt great task in his name.

Many, many tasks throughout our lives seem impossible. But if we stop long enough to realize that nothing is impossible with God, he will give us strength, courage, faith and guidance to do things that formally we

thought were impossible. Each time God helps us we get closer to him and we begin to find out more and more about him.

We have said nothing about the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, his Son. Jesus said, “He that have seen me have seen the father for I and the father are one.”

How true a picture, then, do we hold in our minds of the real greatness of God? It’s easy to magnify human characteristics to the nth degree and imagine such a conception somehow resembles the Nature of God. Or we can imagine God as the mind infinitely greater than any of the marvels he creates and sustains. All that is awe-inspiring, and it’s no bad thing to be awe-inspired, but size is not greatness, and awe is not love. And if we are to see the true greatness of God, and come to love and worship him, we must look again at Christ. Perhaps we shall see the unfailing patience, the unremitting love and the invincible purpose which is the true greatness in the living God.

Nor will any of you really comprehend the greatness of God by my preaching; give your lives to Christ and experience this feeling for yourselves.

We haven’t said anything about the revelation of God in his Word. Read the Bible and study it, you will find God there.

This sermon is not in the form of a logical argument. I have said nothing about attending church as a means of learning about God. Very simply, I have said let’s try an experiment: live in God’s world, (I mean really live-not the way most of us do today); live in God’s grace; (this means, accept God’s grace, it’s there waiting for you); engage in God service, (there are many things, each and every one of us can do in service for God), regardless of how meager we may think our talents are, you will be given much inside information concerning God in whom you live, and move, and have your being.



## **Instruments of Righteousness**

### **Scripture: Romans 12:1-21**

The text is chosen from Romans 6:13, “Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.”

Is it possible for any person with eyes wide open to look out upon the world of today with any sense of satisfaction? Or complacency? Whatever spectacles we may be wearing, whether those of the pessimist or of the optimist, the liberal or the conservative, the poor man or the rich man, the world does not take on a rosy hue. Sometimes the world looks like a city submerged in smog that chokes the throat and inflames the eyes, with no hope that the irritant will be dispelled. Or we feel that the world is a heavy burden on our shoulders, more than we can bear.

What then is needed to correct this situation? We can expect nothing from any gadget or device to clear away the smog. International and national contrivances are put into operation and prove disappointing. We wait for new philosophies or new applications of old philosophies to clear the air, but we wait in vain. Political platforms, new laws, and the judgments of courts confuse the issues. Instead of government lifting the burden, it seems to increase it. Religion revives throughout the world, but the turmoil grows greater. The Christian churches grow in number of adherents, but the sociologists register statistics of a moral decline. And an upsurge of crime.

The world needs instruments of righteousness. The world needs new men and women who have truly accepted Jesus Christ into their lives as their personal Lord and Savior. And men and women who are not afraid to say so and tell others about it. First, people become the instruments of righteousness period. Of course, people are also the instruments of doing wrong. If people have brought about the present situation, people will continue it, worsen it or better it.

The better day may begin when the church takes seriously again what some have called its number one priority. Its function is to make good people. Good people are the instruments, the implements, the weapons of righteousness. Why do programs end in failure, judgments confuse, governments prove inept, churches find themselves inadequate to meet modern issues? Is this not for lack of good people, strong people, dedicated people, great people? And is it not the function of the Christian Church to produce such people? I truly believe it is the Church’s function. But let us remember who and what the church is. It is you and I, and it certainly isn’t going to be any more effective than its members.

Since last Sunday was laity Sunday in a good many churches, we think of laypeople who in times past dealt effectively with bad situations. There was a printer named Robert Raikes who saw a need for something to be done for children; and amidst the press of business activities, he found time and energy to publicize

and popularize the Sunday school.

We recall Lord Shaftesbury who battled on behalf of children, minors, and chimney sweeps, against heavy odds, unshackling them from the chains of industrial slavery; he was a mighty instrument of righteousness. George Williams, in his early 20s, and his salary but 40 pounds a year, pioneered the establishment of the YMCA. Booker T. Washington led his people to a larger life. Doctor William Wandless gave hope to the blind, the lepers, and tuberculosis sufferers of India. These are but a few who, nurtured by the church, became instruments of righteousness in the name of Christ. There are many, many more like them. They face bad situations in such places as Washington, D.C., in Harlem, South Africa, South America. Such people are definitely needed today in government, in business, in all walks of life. The world needs better men and women. And they are the churches obligation to produce. How else can we hope to have a better world to live in, especially for our children and our children's children? If all of us do not become better persons? And the only way I know for each of us to become a better person is through Jesus Christ.

There is a young man, a graduate of Harvard Law School, who decided to throw in his lot with the people who live in the toughest quarter of East Harlem, New York City. He had come under the influence of Christ through reading the Bible. William Stringfellow is supremely happy as he laborers in his poverty-stricken office, which has become a clinic for human life needing redemption. "We all want justice", he says, "but the poor man can't afford justice." As a lawyer, he finds his work fascinating because he is dispensing the medicine of justice, which is very precious for the dignity of human living. From his Harlem hideout, he occasionally tells his lawyer friends what their duty is to the old and the colored people, the rich and the very poor, the flotsam and jetsam of this city where the races of the world jostle for life. Here is a man who has taken Christ into his life completely, not just on Sunday morning, but every minute of every day. This is what a real Christian is.

Every thoughtful person knows that the next few years will be critical for the human race. What is being decided is the kind of society, the kind of ideals, the kind of liberties, the kind of authority under which future generations will live. Whatever happens, it will be a different world. Will it be a world in which men, women, and children will be free to think and worship, free to grow in faith and love; a world in which truth and honesty, respect for human life, acceptance of rights and duties, liberty of the spirit, are the basis of society? These things are threatened today-and not only from one direction. The waters begin to run more swiftly as the river approaches the cataract. This is not a time for resting on the oars. It takes dedicated men and women to keep us moving in the right direction and I believe these men and women are going to come from our Christian churches under God's guidance and direction.

Second, people become instruments of righteousness who yield themselves to God, or as the New English Bible puts it, "Put themselves at the disposal of God." Have you put yourself at God's disposal? Have you said, "Here am I, send me?" Yield implies self-action. It is response to call. It is important to know who calls and to what purpose. Is it not the function of the church to lift up the Christ, so that he may be seen, and his call heard; so that people may be moved to yield to God and become his instruments? I truly

believe it is the function of the church, which is you and I, its members.

In 1623, all things were rushing pell-mell towards turgid crisis, wild tumult, and self-revolution. England at home, which was then England abroad; the outlook was as bleak as bleak could be. The world wanted a man, a good man, a great man, a strong man, to save it. Everybody saw the need; but nobody could see the man. Down in Huntingdonshire a young farmer, leans on the handles of his plow. "The world needs a man, a good man, a great man, a strong man!" says his Reason. And then he hears another voice. "Thou art the man," cries his Conscience, with terrifying sullenness; and his hands tremble as they grasped the plow. That evening, as he sits by the fire, his young wife opposite him, and little Robert in the cot by his side, Oliver Cromwell takes down his Bible and reads. He turns to the Epistle to the Philippians at the closing chapter. He is amazed at the things that, by the grace divine, Paul claims to have learned and achieved. "It's true, Paul," he exclaims, "that you have learned this and attained to this measure of grace; but what shall I do? Ah, poor creature, it is a hard, hard lesson for me to take out! I find it so!" Poring over the sacred volume, however, he makes the discovery of his lifetime. "I came," he says, "to the 13th verse where Paul saith, "I can do all things through Christ, which strengthened me." "Then forth began the work, and my heart to find comfort and support; and I said to myself, "He that was Paul's Christ is my Christ too and so I drew water out of the well of salvation." And so the clodhopper became the king!

Paul, in our text was writing to church members. He was continuing to call for their yielding so that they might give continuing response. We become effective instruments of righteousness only as we give continued and continual response to God. Paul says, "Yield your bodies to him as implements of doing right." This carries our minds to his further word in Romans 12:1, "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies as living, sacrifice, wholly acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Yield all that you are to the Christ. "Your bodies" we would expect 'your souls'; wouldn't we? But the Bible is very cautious use of the word 'soul'-in case we get the idea that religion is a separate department of life, a vague, mystical, Sunday- only affair. "Your bodies" bring us down to earth. It's you, God wants-the whole you. We are asked to present to him this body, the same body that will wake tomorrow morning, the same body that will be around your home, that will be at work during the day, that will be in contact with other bodies, the body that eats, the body that sleeps, the body that walks, the body that expresses itself in so many different ways, the body that houses your brain, the body that is the instrument of your spirit.

When the finger of God points in your direction, it is you-the whole you, the real you, the everyday you that he wants. The Lord wants my body as a "living sacrifice". He asks for it when it is thoroughly alive! We so often deny the Lord our bodies, until they are infirm and sickly, and sometimes we do not offer them to him until they are quite "worn out". It is infinitely better to offer them even then than never to offer them at all. But it is best of all to offer our bodies to our Lord when they are strong, and vigorous, and serviceable, and when they can be used in the strenuous places of the field. You will notice in Romans 12:1, Paul adds curious words. He says this is "your reasonable service". Dedication isn't some supercharged emotional experience that can happen only to a spiritual genius. It's a perfectly reasonable thing for the ordinary

man or woman, boy or girl, who believes in God. The Greek word is actually 'logical'. It is your "logical service". If there really is a God in charge of the universe, if there really is a God who cares for each of us, what could be more logical than dedicating our whole selves to him-just opening up our lives and saying, "I am yours; make me what I ought to be." And what could be more illogical than to profess to believe in God almighty and refuse to offer him the only gift it is in our power to make-ourselves? What God can do with one person who has yielded himself to him as an instrument of righteousness, no person can measure.

What a changed world this would become if the thousands of men and women in the Christian Church would yield themselves to God, soul and body, as instruments of righteousness! What leverage God would be given in every area of the world's life! This would be leveraged to lift the world out of the wretched smog-like evil in which it lies submerged. Let us truly become God's instrument of righteousness.

# **Magnificent Compulsion**

## **Scripture: Matthew 9:18-31**

The text is chosen from John 9:4, “While daylight last, we must carry on the work of him that sent me; night comes, when no man can work.”

Even very small children dislike the compelling hand. There is a natural streak of rebellion in all of us, which recounts the imposition of authority, especially when force is used. This kind of compulsion is outside the scope of this sermon. The compulsion of which we speak today is exerted from the depths of personality. It is universal compulsion. By such compulsion, Jesus had to heal the blind men in our scripture lesson this morning. In light of the work of Jesus, we shall consider this inner compulsion.

First of all, we have the compulsion of honor. When a man’s business is going around doing good, then the opportunity to do good requires his action. Jesus had announced the opening of the eyes of the blind as a function of his ministry. In Luke 4:18 we read; “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind.” Refusal to heal blindness would have been hypocritical and dishonorable. Is not the possession of the ability or talent accompanied by a demand to use it? It is compulsion of honor which a man feels and acts upon when he meets opportunity for service with service rendered.

The compulsion of honor is often expressed in the payment of a debt. Jesus owed nothing to these blind men, but we find a fine honor. In his concern for his mother on the day of crucifixion, to her he surely owed a debt. Did he not arrive at a point of honor when he said to his disciples, “You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my father appointed a Kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you.”

Most of us are honorable people. We are trustworthy and we have integrity. If we owe someone something we want to repay him. Perhaps we, more often than not, want to repay more than we borrowed or more than we owe. At any rate, we are compelled to repay. We feel it is our obligation to repay, and we would not have it any other way.

I can remember hearing the story of a man who had a partner in business who absconded and left the firm deeply in debt. The legal situation was such that George could easily have “gotten out from under” as we say. Instead, he took over the debt of honor. The story goes that he is still paying. But also, he had acquired something that money cannot buy. It was a nobility of character, reflected by the honor of the man, compelling him to pay the debt.

Perhaps these are the kinds of partners that are needed in our businesses today. But did you ever stop to think of the debt our Lord has paid for us? He truly gave his life that we might have our sins forgiven for all time and have abundant and eternal life. That I believe. Is the greatest debt anyone could pay.

Secondly, we have the compulsion of compassion. He is hard-hearted indeed who has no compassion for a blind man. There is no trait of Jesus more evident than that of compassion. It was a driving force in his soul issuing in works of healing and mercy. We remember, too, his story of the Good Samaritan on the Jericho Road. The Good Samaritan had deep feelings for the stranger who needed help. He could not walk by and leave the man there in his misery. He was compelled from within to help him. Jesus had deep compassion for all kinds of people, rich or poor, sick or well, Jew or Greek. It didn't matter to him, for he truly knew he was sent to do his father's work on this earth.

Do we feel that we are here to do our Lord's work? Or are we more interested in our own gains? Confession, you know, seems to have become an old-fashioned feeling. We should have deep concern because compassion seems to be seeping out of many lives. We give to great causes and community chests, but the confession which drives a man to meet a roadside need seems to diminish. A woman was asked to do a simple, neighborly deed, but refused because she did not want to be "involved", whatever she meant by that. What is Christianity if not involvement? I have said often that we are becoming indifferent, complacent, fence straddlers because we don't want to become involved with anything. We have concern for ourselves and ourselves only. We say let each person shift for himself and take care of himself. Our motto - one man's bad luck is another man's gain.

If we are a Christian, then we are involved whether we think so or not. Being involved with Jesus Christ is a real. Involvement that never ends. Again, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the sin of the priest and Levi lay not simply in the fact that they were callous enough to leave an injured man, by the way, bad as that was, but rather in their unwillingness to become involved in the situation, it was much too risky whichever way you looked at it. The thieves might still be around the corner. The whole scene might have been staged to lure others into the trap; perhaps the man was suffering justly for some wrong, that he had done; in any case, in all probability, he is some way ceremonially unclean; the only reasonable thing to do, the only advisable thing, is to "pass by on the other side." We Christians are obligated to turn aside, to pour oil and wine, to bring the wounded to safety, because in the first place there was one who turned aside for us, and by whose grace we live to tell the tale and do the deed.

Anything that we ourselves do not want to do, we usually can justify our inaction, at least to ourselves, whether it is right or wrong. We are good at this. Usually our most favorite excuse is, "I do not have time. I'm too busy." We can be as busy as we ourselves want to make us. We can be busy doing so many things that really are not important at all or we can find time to do things that are really worthwhile. The choice is up to each individual, believe me, I know.

Third, we have the compulsion of relationship. In the instance of Christ healing the blind man, he felt his relationship to God. "I must carry on the works of him who sent me." "God is involved, so am I." "This is the father's work I am doing" "He sent me for this purpose." Jesus said, "the Father and I are one." He felt a very close relationship with God. We too, as Christians, should feel this same kind of relationship

with God. Actually, getting to know Jesus Christ assures us of this fatherly, childlike relationship. It is not unusual for a man to do works of mercy, “for Christ’s sake.” Then, too, this man in need is my brother. The ties of relationship under the fatherhood of God cannot be broken no matter what gap of difference exists between one man and another under the compulsion of relationship. It should never be a gap of indifference. The noble Samaritan is constrained to help an unfortunate Jew. It is noble compulsion of soul.

Fourth, we have the compulsion of love. Of course, Christ had the help of the blind men, his honor, his compassion, his relationship to God and his brother - these demanded his action. Character of his soul put a “must” in his life. He was under the compulsion of love. That is the keyword. That is the depth of the matter. Love cares. Love cares to the point of action. “God so love the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” Love is expressed in action. When Jesus said, “Peter, do you love me?” and received his disciples after affirmative response, the master said, “feed my sheep.” What great things have been done in the world under the compulsion of love? What great things can and must still be done in the world under the compulsion of love?

Just think if all so called Christians in our world really were compelled to love each other, as well as the fellow men, what a different world we would be living in. There would be no fear of war as there is today. There would be no people starving to death while some of the world have an abundance to throw away. Everyone would also have the opportunity to hear about Jesus Christ and what he can do for your life because we would be witnessing to everyone we could. Greed, selfishness, hatred, lust, would not exist because all the world would be compelled to love. The love of God expresses itself through human media, through persons like you and I; and if we accept or adopt the Revised Standard Version, instead of saying, “I must work”, we read, “we must work”. Then we have Christ, extending the law which ruled over his own life to his followers and making it supremely obligatory and binding upon each of us.

Fifth, we have the compulsion of time. “Night comes!” Great Christian souls have felt the compulsion of time. They have written, “the night cometh” upon the faces of their watches, upon the flyleaves of their books, upon sundials in their gardens, upon ornamental objects, on their desks. If Jesus felt this compulsion, how much more should we feel it now. For those of us who have not truly accepted Jesus Christ into our lives as our personal Lord and Savior, time should definitely be very important. We should not waste a moment of it. We definitely need to get our own lives in order first and stop being concerned about someone else. For Jesus Christ is definitely going to come a second time, and it would behoove all of us to be ready while there is still time. Many say that there are signs that now we are going through the last days according to prophecy in the Bible. Whether this is true or not, I do not know, but if my own life is right with God, then I do not have to be concerned about the exact time of Jesus’ second coming. Get your life in the right perspective, then you can concentrate on helping others. God will never accept the excuse that “I was too busy.” For I know we can find time for the important things in life if we want to.

Sixth, we have the compulsion of necessity. Maybe we drew illustrations from the Japanese language. The word “must” in that language is generally expressed by a circumlocution. “You must do it”, is just

this way, “if you do not do it, it is not done.” That means ‘must’. If Jesus had not opened the eyes of the blind men, it would not have been done. It was necessary for him to do it. How many more deeds and nobler deeds would be done in the world, if men felt the compulsion. Many of us do not do things to help someone else because we are sure the other fellow will do it. And many times, the other fellow is waiting for us. And the other person doesn’t get helped. We definitely have to have compulsion to work, in fact it’s a necessity, for if we do not work, we do not get paid and our family does not eat. A definite act of compulsion, of necessity.

Seventh, and finally, we have the compulsion of personality. In the translation of our text, differences have appeared. Some put it, “we must carry on the work.” The King James version reads, “I must work.”. What difference does it make? “No man is an island.” I must work because I am I -- I feel the compulsion of my nobler self. I must work because we are working together to do the works for which we were sent. I and we are both in the purposes of God. I would like to read a poem. Entitled “The Dog and the Work.”

To each man is given a day and his work for the day;  
and once, and no more, he is given to travel this way.  
And woe, if he flies from the task, whatever the odds;  
For the task is appointed to him on the scroll of the Gods.  
There is waiting a work where only your hands can avail;  
And so, if you falter, a cord in the music will fail,  
We may laugh to this sky, we may lie for an hour in the sun;  
But we dare not go hence till the labor appointed is done.  
Yes, the task that is given to each man, no other can do;  
So your task is awaiting; it has waited through ages for you.”

We combine these compulsions under the word ‘magnificent’. These inner compulsions of a man’s soul - the compulsions of honor, compassion, relationship, love, time, necessity, personality, - add up to a magnificent compulsion. Dare we neglect to heed God’s words to us and live the lives as if God doesn’t exist?



## **Stand Up in Dignity and Worth**

### **Scripture: John 19:1-22**

The text is chosen from Ezekiel 2:1, “And he said to me, Son of Man, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you!”

Friday, October 31st, is Reformation Day - the 458th anniversary of the breaking of the iron grip of the medieval Roman Catholic Church on the life of the Western World. It is the birthday of the Protestant understanding of Christianity. To the degree that any great movement in history can be termed the work of anyone man, The Reformation is the work of Martin Luther. Each year when we celebrate Reformation Day, we remember the year 1521 when Luther was summoned before the emperor, Charles the 5th and the Diet of Worms, to defend the religious views that he had fearlessly proclaimed in a number of penetrating pamphlets. Standing face to face with the bishops and arched archbishops, the rich and the powerful of his day, Luther knew that these leaders held his fate in their hands. Yet, asked to deny his beliefs, he courageously replied, “I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no otherwise. May God help me, Amen.” “Here I stand,” affirmed Luther.

“Son of man, stand up on thy feet, and I will speak to these,” was the voice of the Lord unto the prophet Ezekiel. It is neither the historical incident nor the apocalyptic vision of which I wish to speak this morning, except to draw from the inspiration and encouragement for ourselves to stand up in our own places as men of dignity and worth. “Stand on your feet!” If our lives are to count, we must stand up and be counted. Very few of us have the courage to stand up and tell others what we believe or think. We are willing to keep quiet and to go along with the crowd. Many of us do not even know why we are Protestants; our parents and grandparents were, so that’s good enough for us. I think basically most of us are lazy. We do not want to learn anything about our beliefs or our faith. It doesn’t make any difference anyway, as long as everything is going OK. It’s time that we stand up and be counted. The Book of Ezekiel in the Bible is not too well known today. It tells the story of a prophet who finally bore witness to the truth of God. We need not know the entire story, only the beginning of it.

God found Ezekiel flat on the ground. We infer from the context that he was licked; he was cowardly. Ezekiel did not want to take up the responsibility of standing up to life and living it as best he could with God’s help. He was lying down and complaining about his lot. God said to him, “stand on your feet.” He could have added, “I can’t speak to you if you are lying on the ground. I want you to stand up in dignity and worth then I will be able to speak to thee” “Son of man”- what a word of honor, dignity, and worth is found in the phrase. For all of us truly are “Sons of God.”

In recent months, many of our fellow citizens in America have protested against inequalities and injustices in our national life. Their sacrificial spirit is much admired, but many of their friends and supporters feel that by a certain lack of dignity, their cause was not advanced, and the day of justice was delayed.

We might visit the Diet of Worms to observe the dignity of Luther or follow Jesus through his trial and crucifixion to witness the strength and dignity with which he met opposition and injustice. Is it not a more effective protest to stand up on both one's feet to protest?

Second, if we are to take a stand, we must recognize that it is obligatory for men, individually and collectively, to stand for something of enduring worth. So many of us stand for things that do not amount to very much. Latimer, in December 1529, was asked to preach before King Henry the VIII. In the robing room, he said that he heard a voice speaking to him saying, "You'd better be careful, Latimer, you are preaching before the King of England." Then, thank God, another voice came to him saying, "Latimer, Latimer, be careful what you say, you are preaching before the King of Kings." He went in and preached the word of God so courageously that he lost his head and thereby won immortality.

Many of us are so cautious and take extreme care to make sure we make an impression on other people, especially if that person is important, and can be influential for us. We do all kinds of things and sometimes go to great expense to make this top-notch appearance and impression. I wonder how many of us really try to impress our Lord.

Perhaps we just take him for granted. Well, we do not have to impress God because he knows more about us than we ourselves do. He knows our innermost thoughts. He is with us 24 hours a day, every day. So, you see, many of us have really never learned what is important in life and what is not. We still cannot see beyond the physical and material. We just plain live for what is now and give little thought to living beyond this present life. We definitely need to change our thinking and start taking life more seriously and deeply. How important is a cause to live for, and, if need be, to die for!

A student in a despairing mood wrote in the Princeton Weekly: "The trouble with me is that I cannot believe in anything. I can never tell when a day might come, when, losing control because I am sick of it, I will go tearing around town in search of a cause." How sad is the plight of this young man! By this time, let us hope that he has found a worthy cause for which he can bet his life. There is probably more hope for him than for those whose heart never throbs, who's anger never rises, whose sword is never lifted in the "strife of Truth and Falsehood." Perhaps we cannot understand the young man who said, "I will go tearing around town searching for a cause." There must be something lacking in his education.

Are there many like him? Who are these youths in our neighborhoods who go on a rampage and destroy public and private property? What they do is so utterly without meaning. Considerable argument could be summoned that they are really searching for a cause. Give them a great and worthy cause and they will stand on their feet in dignity and worth. Is this true? I really do not know whether this is true or not, but I would like to suggest, that we look at these young people's parents. I think there we can find the answer to why some of them act the way they do. Are their parents dedicated Christians who serve their Lord through their church? Does the family worship together in church and Sunday school? Have the children and young people been taught (in the home, the meaning of Christian love?) Are the parents really

interested in what happens in the community, the state, the nation and the world? Or are they just satisfied with getting everything out of this world they can and putting nothing back? This is like the man who took all the profits out of his business for himself, he put nothing back into the business and finally he found that he really had no business at all. His buildings were falling down around him.

Life can fall down around us too if we are interested only in ourselves. Many of us ask what is the younger generation coming to? Perhaps we might have to say, where is our generation going to. For we had better look at ourselves as parents, before we criticize our young people. Right here in our own community, I believe we parents had better start looking at ourselves. There is growing evidence of the fact that many things and interest in our lives, come ahead of God and the church. This is evidenced by attendance in church, Sunday school and youth meetings. The church does not run by itself. Everyone seems to be concerned about having a church, but as I have said before, concern is not enough, we need action along with concern. Children and young people are only going to be as interested as their parents and adults are. It's time all of us stood up to be counted. Stand for something that is worthwhile, then you will not have to be concerned about the trivial things in life. It would be a natural sequence to say that a man is known by the stand he takes. There is, however, a more important consideration. A man knows himself by the stand he takes. Deep down in his own soul, a man knows whether he has proven himself a hero or a coward.

It is written, for all to read, that on a certain occasion Thomas the disciple said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Even after that hour of decision Thomas knew that he had stood upon his feet. He knew that in an hour of crisis and danger, he did not shrink.

It may seem romantic to read about Valley Forge, or to go there in the summer, but you wouldn't want to live through a winter there as George Washington and his men did. It is easy to be a "summer soldier". In Maxwell Anderson's play, "Valley Forge", there is a scene of men deserting. Washington, aware of this and reasoning why, told a little group in his headquarters that perhaps it was foolish for him to fight any longer. Then one of the women present said, "Washington, there's a king in you that was not born to know defeat." Well, that king in him made him stand for an unpopular cause and carry on in spite of everything.

We all have moments in our lives when we feel like giving up and we say what's the use. Then perhaps, a voice says to us, "Son of Man, stand on your feet and I will speak to you." God is the one that can make us stand on our feet. He can guide us through all difficulties in life. No one can give us this kind of guidance. No one can give us the faith and courage we need to face each living day. And I believe we can find this voice, our God, in his house. True, we can talk to God wherever we are, but as Christians we need to come together as a group in true Christian fellowship and worship our God together. Worshipping together in God's house can bring refreshment to our soul. It is a great thing to carry through life the memories of these moments when you pass through hell and did not flinch. Others may not know the price you paid when you took that stand for honor and righteousness' sake, but you know and that is high reward. It takes courage, strength, and faith. to withstand the many hard knocks in life. Life isn't easy and I'm sure we wouldn't want it to be.

I believe Jesus Christ can help each of us in our daily lives. He can help us to make the right choices and decisions. He will stand by us through thick and thin. And when we are all through, we will be stronger and have more faith than we ever have had. "Son of Man, stand upon thy feet and I will speak to thee".

We recall these lines from "The Present Crisis.", by James Russell Lowell.

"Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of Truth or Falsehood,  
For the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,  
offering each the bloom or blight,  
Past the goats upon the left hand and the sheep upon the right,  
And the choice goes by forever 'Twill  
that darkness and that light.

God has made men so that we have the power to choose the right from wrong. Stand up on your feet so that God can speak to you. For I know he truly will.

# **That Christmas and This Christmas**

## **Scripture: Luke 2:1-18**

Text from Luke 2:13-14; “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.” The Christmas when Jesus was born - about A. D.1; this twentieth century Christmas - 1977 - how different they are and still, how similar they are. We will try to stress similar points in the two Christmases by asking four questions of that time and of this.

First, what was the universe doing in A.D.1? The sun was rising and setting. The moon was waxing and waning. The planets were turning in their courses. The stars were shining, visible by night, invisible by day. The waters were running toward the sea. The canyons were deepening. The trees were blossoming and bearing fruit, each after its own kind. The grass was sprouting after rain. The wild beasts were gathering at night at the water pools. The creature called man was spreading upon the face of the earth. What is the universe in 1977? I would say it is doing approximately the same as A.D. 1.

Second, - what was the nation doing in a D1? What was Caesar, “the August, the Sublime, the Royal, the Regal,” doing in Rome.? What was Herod, who appropriated the title of “Great”, doing in Jerusalem?

Luke gives the answer: Caesar was taxing the people. Death and taxes are known as the inevitables. What difference did it make if a young carpenter named Joseph had to go without a new tool? What difference did it make if Mary had to put off buying the coveted garment for her expected baby? What difference did it make if they had to make the long journey to Bethlehem, with Mary great with child? Taxes must be paid! Caesar’s roads, armies, palaces, court, must be supported.

“And of all that Augustus Caesar did with the taxes of the whole world, there remains nothing but crumbling and half burned ruins.

And what was Caesar’s underling doing? Committing terrible atrocities. Herod was engaged in Operation Slaughter. And all the things that Herod did - the building of the temple, the construction of cities, the creation of palaces, the taking to himself of the name. “Great” - it seems that nothing remains. Herod grew old. His last days were embittered. The word. “Great” is ironic - Herod belongs to a line which includes Nero, Tamerlane, Hitler, Mussolini. What was the nation doing? Taxing and slaughtering.

Suppose we could look back from A.D. 3954 to this Christmas, as we look back from 1977 to that Christmas, what might we observe? The nation was taxing. All of us can vouch for that. Taxes keep going higher and higher because we as a people are demanding more and more services, because there is corruption in government which we have and are allowing. The nation was using taxes in preparation for what might be called Operation Killer. It is strange, isn’t it? That Christmas actually means peace, peace to all people everywhere. And still the many billions of dollars are tax dollars that are spent each and every year on

defense preparedness. We seem to talk out of both sides of our mouths at the same time. We say we want peace and still we prepare for war. Perhaps we need to be prepared. I cannot answer that question, but there certainly are a good many places that money could be used to do much more good. If truly the spirit and true meaning of Christmas could enter each and everyone's heart, there would be peace and happiness in our world. I do not believe there will be peace until this happens. Getting back to our comparison of the two Christmases, the nation is doing about the same today as in A.D.1; taxing the people and preparing for war. Or perhaps we should say building up our defenses.

Third, what were the people doing in A.D.1? Their shekels were going into Caesar's coffers; at least some of their sons were going into Caesar's armies.

But the people, what were they doing? Luke suggests an answer. He writes: "And there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night." The shepherds were tending their flocks. The farmers were tilling their fields. The carpenters like Joseph, were building houses. Artesians were making furniture. Merchants were buying and selling grain, clothing, rugs, jewelry. The people, the great masses, were working. How can they pay taxes if they don't work?

Then too, the people were worshipping. Some were worshipping Jehovah. Some were worshipping Diana. Augustus Caesar was demanding that the people worship him, and many obliged, Others worshipped the sun.

There you have what the people were doing in the first Christmas – paying taxes, working, worshipping. The Jews still worship Jehovah. Multitudes still worship the goddess of pleasure and lust. Men receive his acclaim. The state is exalted. Men bow down to gods of their own contrivance and manufacture. Today everything is measured materially and even though we think we do not, many of us have placed the greatest importance on the acquisition of material things,

But now! A tremendous point of difference! Myriads worship the Babe that was born on that first Christmas. This Christmas, he is the joy of the world, and the hope of the world, In fact, the only hope the world has is Jesus Christ. "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light." Jesus, said, "I am the light of the world." We need never walk in darkness with Christ at our side. Many millions of Christians have found this light that came at Christmas time, A.D.1. Have you seen this light?

Fourth, what was God doing in A.D.1? He was sustaining the universe. Since that first Christmas, the sun has risen over 22,000 times. It has never failed to rise. The moon has waxed great and illuminated the earth by its fall-reflected loveliness about 24,000 times. We know its movements and its modes. There have been 1977 spring times with flower, and as many summers of fruitage. The water is not erratic, it still runs towards the sea. All is in order. God is sustaining the universe now as then. What was God doing? God was overruling the nations. In the face of what nations, kings, parliaments, presidents do, what does God do? Much of what he does is beyond our knowledge. We do not presume to know his way with the nations.

But he does enter on into history. Is it too much to say that God overrules? God is overruling the nations!

When Speaking of the Constitution of the United States, which has recently been framed, and expressing his disapproval of many provisions in the document, Benjamin Franklin said: "I can hardly conceive a transaction of such momentous importance to the welfare of millions now existing and to exist in the posterity of a great nation should now be suffered to pass without being in some degree influenced Why? So guided and governed by that omnipotent, omnipresent, and beneficent Ruler, in whom all inferior spirits live and move and have their being." Franklin was affirming his faith in the overruling of God and historic event.

At the first Christmas, God made a Caesar's decree the occasion to follow out his own plans.

In A.D.1 he seems to overrule by ignoring Augustus Caesar and Herod the Great. God's Son is born in the litter of a stable, not in the glitter of the palace. Herod's City is passed by in favor of the village of Bethlehem. God ignores the proud, but let's the proud make the circumstances.

Pharaoh reduces the family of Jacob to virtual slavery; God uses the occasion to the make them a great people.

Again, in the Exodus story, the Jews are carried away into a foreign land; they returned to Jerusalem, and by that experience in captivity they are given a great spiritual experience and endowment.

Let Caesar the Augustus decree that each man must be taxed in his own city. That means that Joseph and Mary must go to Bethlehem. This offers the occasion to fulfill the prophecy of Micah. Christ is born in Bethlehem. What is God doing in the face of what the people are doing? He is fathering his people. He is doing this by sustaining the universe. He is doing this by overruling the nations. He is doing this through the wonderful birth - keeping a promise, exalting the common people, giving a Savior, shepherding their souls, revealing himself, giving eternal life, giving all the right and privilege and power to become sons of God. What was God doing on that first Christmas? He was keeping a promise written out by ancient prophets on parchment. He was keeping a promise written out on living tissue in the hearts of the people.

He was exalting men of low degree. He was placing a halo above the head of Mary motherhood, above the heads of shepherds, common folk. As Doctor Jewett wrote: "the very birth hour of Christianity irradiated the humble doings of humble people.

God was revealing to the world what he himself, was like that the child grown to manhood would say, "He that hath seen me have seen the Father." He was kindling a light in a dark World.

He was saving a dying world.

What is God doing now? Sustaining the universe, overruling the nations; fathering his children.

In a little book by Charles L Wallis and Charles L Allen, “When Christmas Came to Bethlehem,” they quote Will Durant’s “The Story of Philosophy.” Durant writes of another kind of deity: “Aristotle’s God never does anything. He has no desires, no will, no purpose. He is actively so pure that he never acts. He is absolutely perfect. Therefore, he cannot desire anything. His sole employment is the contemplation of himself. Poor Aristotelian God. He is a do-nothing King. The King reigns but does not rule. “But it is not so with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What should we be doing this Christmas? We should be exercising faith in his sustaining. We should be putting our hope in his overruling. We should be responding to his fathering in love toward God and in love toward our fellowmen. Christmas truly is a time for accepting Jesus Christ into our lives, a time for letting his peace come into our hearts and letting it spread to all people everywhere. I would like to conclude by reading a poem entitled “Christmas”.

Christmas is wonder in an infant’s clear eyes;  
Source of the thoughts in the mind of the wise.  
Christmas is gladness, true mirth, and real joy,  
Songs in the air at the birth of the Boy.  
Christmas is goodwill in the heart of a friend,  
Promise of peace to the world’s farthest end.  
Christmas is love, in your heart and in mine,  
Kindled by Jesus our Savior divine.  
Christmas is giving; God’s gift to the earth,  
Giving Himself in a Babe’s humble birth.



# **The Book of Dangerous Ideas**

## **Scripture: Matthew 5:17-20 & 43-48**

I have chosen a text from Isaiah 9:2, “in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.”

The Bible is many things to many people. To untold millions, it is a book of comfort and peace. It is also a book of courage and strength. It is a book of healing and forgiveness. It is a book of salvation and the assurance of eternal and everlasting life.

Why does the Bible meet the deepest needs? Why has this book persisted from age to age, from civilization to civilization? Whence this amazing power to bring light to nations and individuals?

It is because it is the word of God. It is because it tells of Christ. The Old Testament leads up to him; the New Testament contains our enduring record of his birth, his life, his words, his death, his resurrection, and his effect through the Holy Spirit upon his early followers and on the formation of the church. The perpetuation of that light has involved human hands passing it on from one to another. This light will never go out. In this Christmas season, we must see a fresh that, as far as in us lies, all men shall be led by it into the ways of lasting peace. Truly, this is the objective of Christianity and the true meaning of Christmas - peace to all men everywhere.

However, the Bible is even more than all these things we have mentioned. The Bible is also a book of dangerous ideas. By dangerous I mean disturbing to this status quo, disturbing to those of us who are satisfied with our lives as they are, disturbing to those of us who have feelings of complacency. Let us discover a few of these dangerous ideas this morning.

First of these dangerous ideas concerns property rights. Briefly stated, it is this: a common man has property rights that no one - not even a king dash can take away from him.

This idea unfolds in the dramatic story of Naboth and his vineyard in 1 Kings 21, Naboth owned a vineyard beside the palace of Ahab, King of Samaria. Ahab wanted to buy Naboth's vineyard for himself or exchange it for another piece of land in another part of Samaria. However, Naboth said that the Lord forbid him to give the inheritance of his father to Ahab. Arab was very distressed because he wanted this vineyard very badly.

Ahab's wife, Jessabelle, saw that her husband was very upset because he could not obtain this vineyard. She preceded to encourage Ahab, saying that he was the king, and she would see to it that Ahab could acquire the land. So, Jezebel conspired and accused Naboth falsely of things he had not done. In fact, she accused him of cursing God and the King. So, because of their charge, Naboth was stoned to death and Ahab took

over his vineyard. Now the Lord, knowing what had happened sent Elijah to tell Ahab that because of these wicked things he had done to Naboth, his life would be taken. Also, his wife Jezebel would die.

God does know our every thought, and if we think we are kidding anyone, we are mistaken for we are only killing ourselves. We do have property rights, at least in this country, and that which rightfully belongs to us, cannot be taken away as long as we obey the laws of the land.

The second of the dangerous ideas from the Bible that we would consider concerns human rights: persons are more important than things.

We should keep this in mind when we are accumulating our empires. Keep in mind, when you step on those people who are in your way as to try to get to the top. Think of it when you acquire more and more material possessions, while millions of people are starving in our world, and little is done to help them. Regardless of how rich we may become; it will not do us any good at all when we die for, we cannot take it with us. It really doesn't matter to God what our status on earth was for when we die and whether or not we get into heaven, our wealth has not a thing to do with it.

From Luke 12:15 we read, "and Jesus said to them, take heed, and beware of all. covetousness: for a man's life doesn't consist in the abundance of his possessions." I'm sure you remember when Jesus was accused of the crime of doing good on the Sabbath, he replied that his hearers would certainly save a sheep that had fallen into a pit, even on the Sabbath day. Then he made this revealing comment.: "of how much more value is a man than a sheep?" The point is, I believe, we can live to the letter of the law, doing exactly as the man-written laws say and as the Pharisees of Jesus' day did, but overlook the human need that is right in front of us and not fulfill God's law. Which are by far the most important. I am sure, if we live our lives according to God's laws as best we can, we will have no trouble fulfilling man's laws. The Bible is the book that tells us these things. It would be dangerous to lose this book; the human would become inhuman.

The third of the dangerous ideas widens the circle of human dignity to include all men, there must be no partiality shown because of money, class, or place. James expressed this idea. In James 2:1-4, we read, "my brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, 'have a seat here, please'; while you say to the poor man, 'stand there, or sit at my feet', have you not made a distinction among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" I believe most of us are judges every day. We pretty well judge a person by how he looks, what he wears, the car he drives, etc. At least this is our first judgement of a person. I mean, if a man were to walk into this church with shabby clothes and sit down, all of us would be leery of him, I'm sure. Such a man would not feel comfortable for this is the very way most of us judge individuals. Perhaps we did not intend it to be this way, but this is the way it is. Religion today in the country is for the middle class and above, not the poor and lowly. We need to consider this and ask ourselves if it isn't true. I do not know whether we can change it or not, but I believe we certainly should try.

The Apostle Paul applied the law of no partiality to race, as well as to other factors, as he wrote to the Galatians these unforgettable words: “there is neither Jew nor Greek, you are all one in Jesus Christ.” This idea. Of the worth of every individual, of equal rights for all people, of freedom and liberty for every human being on this planet, lies at the heart of the Christian Gospel.

This is something that should be considered in this racial situation in which we are involved in this country. I’m sure God does not even consider or question the color of our skin. It’s really what we feel and think within our hearts and minds that matter. Perhaps I would look at it differently if I were directly involved. But having racial prejudice and Christianity do not go together, at least not the way I interpret what I read in the Bible. We should also consider why this country was settled by our forefathers in the beginning; liberty and freedom for all men. Why shouldn’t the colored people have these same freedoms as the white?

If I were a dictator, the first book I would burn would be the Bible. I would burn it because I’d realize that the whole concept of democracy came from that book. “Democracy” is a Greek word, which means ruled by the people, but even at the height of its ancient glory, Athens was not a democracy. The Greeks gave a word for it, but the Bible gives us the philosophy for the way of life.” this is the reason the Bible is ruled out in Russia Today. If people were allowed to read and study the Bible, no dictator would be able to exist for the people would not stand for that form of leadership.

Fourth, living by the Golden Rule is another dangerous idea. “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” or going beyond the golden rule when the hated Roman compels you to go the mile of obligation, go the second mile of voluntary self-giving. Strive for a right consensus that is even better than that of your most trusted religious leader. Be perfect as God is perfect! Impossible? Perhaps it is impossible, but this should definitely be our goal in living.

It isn’t always easy to live by the golden rule and even more difficult to turn the other cheek. Basically, I believe we need to think before we act. We always need to put ourselves in the other persons shoes and try to think how he would feel if I gave to him what first came into my mind. I’m sure if we do this, we will overlook the situation or deal out a much less severe retaliation. One simple example of this is driving at night and meeting a car with his high beam lights on. Your first reaction is to flash your high beams, but you stop and think, perhaps this could cause an accident. So, you try to see as best you can and leave your headlights on low beam. Living by the golden rule certainly is not the whole answer to life and living, but it is a good place to start.

Fifth, the Bible has something to say about stewardship. Stewardship is more than the giving of our money, in fact, I believe money is the least important. Giving of yourself to do the Lord’s work, time, talents, and money all are important to good stewardship effort. This church, or any church, cannot run on money alone. God needs dedicated men, women and children who are willing to give of their time and talents to help in spreading his word. Naturally money is needed to maintain God’s house, to insure preaching of his word, to help those in our world that need help. My first concern however is God’s word and whether

people really accept it into their hearts for I know if they really do we will not have to be concerned about money and we will have more than enough persons wanting to help in his work.

Sixth, and finally, when someone reminds us of this possibility; that we are not wise enough or strong enough or good enough to live according to the ideals we find in this book, we are brought face to face with the most dangerous idea of all!! What a man cannot possibly do in his own strength becomes possible when he is empowered by the grace of God.

This brings us to the New Testament idea like the new birth, and the Holy Spirit of God dwelling within us. We find ourselves saying with Paul, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." The possibilities of a God filled life are breathtaking. Life, unlimited, by the grace of God, is the most dangerous, and most wonderful idea of all.

Here is one of the truest, finest things ever said about the Bible. Young Martin Luther's teacher told him: "Leave the Bible alone. It creates unrest." The man who said that was warning against reading the Bible. Actually, he was giving although he did not know it, one of the strongest reasons for reading the Bible. It does create "unrest", thank God! The high moral and spiritual teachings of the Bible create unrest in us, so that we become dissatisfied with ourselves. That moves us to strive to become better. The teachings of the Bible create unrest against tyranny and the denial of liberty - a blessed unrest.

At the Coronation Service of a King (or a Queen) of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury presents a Bible to the sovereign and says, "Most gracious King (or Queen), we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom, this is the royal law; these are the lively oracles of God."

So, the Bible is a book of dangerous ideas – dreams of God for men like us. Truly light shall shine upon us if we really take the time to read God's word and study it. Our eyes, minds and hearts will be opened and I assure you, you will find the answers to your problems, and you will find God speaking too you through his word.

# **The Common and The Elite Kneel Together**

## **Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-12**

I have chosen two texts from Luke 2:16; “And they went with haste.” From Matthew 2:2; “We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him.”

Evening had come. The shepherds, weary from the heat of the day, relaxed in the cool of the evening and prepared for the night’s vigil.

The silent night fell when the golden glow of the sunset had faded. The Wisemen, after a brief pause in Jerusalem, pushed on expectantly towards Bethlehem. The night held mystery and drama. First of all, the Wise Men and shepherds made their way to Bethlehem as seekers. They did not send others to inquire about the star and the birth of the child born to be King. On the contrary, they came themselves to investigate the mystery. The Wisemen, the story indicates, made a long pilgrimage, while the shepherds, “watching their flocks nearby,” rushed eagerly back to Bethlehem to see for themselves what had happened. I think perhaps this little poem. Entitled. “A Shepherd and a King” pretty well explains it:

“A shepherd and a king each sought the goal –  
that brought them to his makeshift manger bed,  
the first with empty hands and bursting soul,  
the other laden well and heralded,  
but each had found the necessary guide,  
a steadfast faith with heart, devoid of pride.”

In one sense, we are more like the shepherds than like the Wisemen. Our cultural patterns defy the spirit of a long pilgrimage in quest of spiritual might and understanding. We are more likely to rush hither and yond, stopping only for a moment to ascertain “What’s New”. Most of us are anxious to seek new ideas, but really do not want to bother to get the details. We are in too much of a hurry to stop long enough. To get into the fine details of anything. Perhaps many of us really and truly are seeking God for our lives, but we are not willing to make any sacrifices or to put ourselves out of the way very much. We are not even willing to meet God halfway. We want him to go 90% or more and then we will do the rest.

Secondly, the shepherds and the wise men came themselves to Bethlehem to explore the meaning of the angel song and the mysterious star, and they discovered that while they were seeking they were sought.

Christmas means essentially that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son” for us. God invaded human life and history, seeking our minds and hearts to save us from the lostness and emptiness we feel.

The good news is that God loves us even when we are not good; he cares for us even when we are unlovable.

The wonder of Christmas says to us, God is seeking you with love, however unlovable and undeserving you may be.

Have you ever talked to the person who feels that he isn't good enough to come to church, that he isn't good enough to pray to God? Well, there are these kinds of people and they really believe they are not good enough for God. Actually, none of us are good enough, and I'm sure it is you and I that have given these people this kind of feeling and attitude. We are all sinners in the sight of God, but Jesus Christ sacrificed his life so our sins could be forgiven and that's why we are here today. And that's why we can converse with God and ask for his help and guidance in our lives. God still loves us, regardless of how bad we have been. The important thing is to recognize the bad we have done, repent of it and promise to try to live a better life through God's help. So, please, do not judge someone else that may come to church, thinking in your mind and heart "what is he doing here, I'm better than he is. He doesn't have any right in God's house"

In the long run of history, the anonymous artisans, like the shepherds, are the really significant builders of the Kingdom. To be sure, the conquerors, preempt the pages of history, while the janitor and the night watchman remain in darkness. As Mark Star wrote, "the dustman and the doctor are both important to our health, but whoever remembers the former except to complain?" The kneeling shepherds remind us that God remembers.

Our status in life doesn't faze God one little bit. It's what we have in our hearts that he is concerned about and that should be our number one concern also.

There they were, the rich and the important beside the ordinary, and at the manger they were alike, sought by the love of God.

We can understand how God could use the three kings of the Orient. They were somebodies, men of wealth and distinctions; but the shepherds were different. Never-the-less, God spoke to them with the eloquence of an angel chorus and called them to the manger to stand in equal dignity with three kings. Our struggle for status is rather thoroughly deflated by the pageantry of the kings and the shepherds kneeling together.

Our status in this life means absolutely nothing to God. We can possess all the wealth possible, we can belong to all the top-notch organizations, we can even go to church each Sunday, but if we haven't truly accepted Jesus Christ into our lives as our personal Lord and Savior, I'm afraid God looks upon us with eyes and heart of sadness. This is one thing money, wealth, and position cannot buy. We all truly are equal in God's sight regardless of material possessions.

In the economy of God, the shepherds, anonymous in their apparent omnipotence, are equals with the kings of the Orient. The only states any of us can claim is status within the love of God calling us to kneel together before the Manger of our Lord.

On stage, Caesar and Herod; behind the scenes, Wisemen and shepherds: “it is so easy to take account of the powerful, the evil, the blatant, and forget the shepherds.” God still has his shepherds behind the scenes.

And so the good news was told to the shepherds, to working men who were toiling in the fields. The Lord of the Christmas tide throws a halo over common toil. Even Christian people have not all learned the significance of the angels visit to the lonely Shepherds. Some of us can see the light resting upon a bishop’s crosier, but we cannot see the radiance on the ordinary shepherd staff. We can see the hallowedness of a priest’s vocation, but we see no sanctity in the calling of the grocer, or of the scavenger in the street. But this very birth-hour of Christianity eradicated the humble doings of humble people.

It is not surprising that when kings and shepherds came themselves to kneel together at the feet of a child born to be king, they went away decisively changed.

The story says the shepherds went back to the fields “glorifying and praising God.” and that was something! Shepherds were probably not noted for their piety or their idealism. They were a rugged hard-bitten lot.

What is more, the story notes that the Wisemen “departed to their own country by another way.” To be sure, the word suggests they chose a route different from the one by which they came. But it is not amiss to suggest they went home different inside, to travel another way of life. We never are the same when we come ourselves into the presence of Jesus Christ and fall under the spell of his spirit.

Believe me when I say that you will be changed, you will live your life differently, you will have a different outlook on life, if you come to truly know the true Jesus Christ. Then you will really know what Christmas means and what a difference Christmas has made in your life. You too will take a different route home and you will feel differently inside.

The shepherds new “the pessimism of experience” for they had struggled against odds, trying to earn a living, and only a meager one at that, from their flocks. Every day was like the day before, and there wasn’t much to inspire hope that tomorrow would be different from today. And we are not very different from the shepherds dealing with our daily task, struggling to make ends meet and to keep ahead of the procession. We often fall into “the pessimism of experience,” unless, like the shepherds, we catch a vision of God’s love in Christ and go back to our ordinary task “glorifying and praising God.”

Or, perhaps, like the Wisemen, we have moved into places of honor and position, only to discover the honors and achievements do not really satisfy the deeper longings of our minds and hearts.

Many of us have become so busily engaged in all kinds of activities that we do not have time to think. Many of us are searching for something but regardless of how busy we make ourselves; we will never find what we search for until we find God; for I believe every man at some time or other in his life is seeking his master, God, our Father. Busyness doesn’t change this longing for something in our hearts. In fact, it’s a very poor

substitute.

The Wisemen, leading honored lives somewhere east of Jerusalem, discovered the “wisdom of experience” isn’t enough. They set off following a star, seeking “the wisdom of hope” at the end of their journey.

Both the shepherds and the Wisemen, kneeling before a Manger in Bethlehem, found “the wisdom of hope” in the love of God, and were changed in mind and in spirit. It may not be amiss to suggest that in our human experience, “all the world looks rosy to one who is loved.” A man gains poise and self-respect in the knowledge he is loved by someone he loves. The world is infused with hope and “the pessimism of experience” becomes the wisdom of hope.

Yes, our wise men must find the key of wisdom in the Lord. In a wider sense than the meaning of the original world, it is true that “the fear of the Lord, is the beginning of wisdom.” To seek mental satisfaction and leave out Jesus is like trying to make a garden and leave out the sun. “Without me, ye can do nothing,” not even in the unraveling of the problems which beset and besiege the mind.

There is a striking line in Gran-Carlo Menotti’s opera “Amal and the Night Visitors.” The line was spoken by the mother of a crippled child visited by the three kings of the Orient on the way to Bethlehem. The Wisemen spoke of the Great King, whose birth had called them from afar, and the mother responded, “for such a king, I’ve been waiting all my life.” When we begin to explore the life and message, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and their meaning for our lives, we come away saying, “for such a king I have been waiting for all my life.”

This Christmas, let us note that bright star in the east and search and follow it until we come to Jesus’s feet, to where our Lord is waiting for us. And so, when we come ourselves to the foot of the manger, we know we are loved by an everlasting love and we go away rejoicing in hope, “glorifying and praising God.” For surely God is the only hope this world of ours has.



# **The Greatest Miracle of the New Testament**

## **Scripture: Isaiah 9: 6,7 Luke 1:26-34**

Text is chosen from Isaiah 9:6, “Unto us a child is born.” If our minds are not too dull to wonder, if our hearts are not closed to divine love, and if our souls are not impervious to beauty and to grace, then we shall discover the great miracle of the New Testament.

The miracle is wrapped up in a sentence of six words, “unto us a child is born.” Or to put it in another wrapping, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.”

As you go to town, you meet several persons in the stores and on the streets; every single one of them was once a baby. None of us can disagree with that. A baby is not a miracle. And yet we might disagree. With such a negative statement - for I believe a baby is a miracle!

The word. “miracle” is difficult to use. The dictionary says miracle means, “any occurrence that cannot be explained by the laws of nature; a marvel.” Perhaps instead of saying, “it’s a miracle,” sometimes we might better say, “I do not understand.” And yet, at other times, for what we do understand, - or might understand if we went to some trouble, - we may as well use the word miracle. Hold in your hand an acorn while looking at a great oak in its autumn glory. Life and growth, though we know so much about them, still hold our minds and enthralls. Perhaps the dictionary meaning of miracle is not complete enough. For even though things can be explained from the natural laws, it is still miraculous to us.

Miracle is rooted in the mystery of God. The man of faith knows God; he cannot explain him. The man of faith believes that God created the world; the miracle is described only in poetry. The man of faith accepts life from the hand of God and returns life into his hand. All this is wonderful and indescribable.

“Unto us a child is born.” - This is the great miracle of the New Testament. Not only the miracle of every child or any child, but the miracle of that child. We bow in awe. This is marvelous in our eyes.

Really, what is this miracle? It is God going out of bounds. This is the kind of thing that God is doing all the time. He is, at least from our point of view, always going out of bounds, not the bounds that he has set for himself. (He never exceeds those bounds) but the bounds that we have set for him: the bounds of our expectations, the bounds of our past experience of what is possible and what can happen, the bounds that we have arranged in patterns that sometimes become so fixed that even God himself finds it almost impossible to break them. He is always going out of those bounds into brand new fields, opening up vistas that we have never dreamed of seeing. That is what God is always doing. That is what he did, especially on Christmas. He performed a miracle.

The real miracle of Christmas is Jesus himself - not just the wonder of his birth, but much more. The

wonder and glory of all that went before and all that followed after.

We marvel before the cradle of the child because he is a child of promise. That scene in Bethlehem is promise - fulfillment. Truly, Jesus Christ came to earth to be our Lord and Savior, our Redeemer. Let us note that our text, “unto us a child is born,” was written some 700 years before the child coming. These words, and the words that immediately follow them, though they may have been written as an oracle to celebrate the ascension of a Judean king, could not be held to that occasion. These are words of prophetic poetry. They are burdened with hope that burned in the heart of the Jewish people. The Exodus miracle is not enough to satisfy the hearts of men; it looks forward to a greater miracle. And so “in the fullness of time” “unto us a child is born,” a child of promise, of prophecy, of poetry, of hope. Is not this a miracle?

One miracle is enough. This miracle is beyond all other miracles, and this one miracle is enough. If in any way, we respond to this, finding in Christ the image of God, the way to God, the life of God flowing into ours, then we don't need to be much concerned about any other miracle in the Bible or elsewhere. For truly this one miracle is enough for all of us for all time. If we really and truly do come to know Jesus Christ, we will most assuredly find God is him because Jesus said, “the Father and I are one,” and indeed they are. As Christians, Jesus Christ is our only way to God and this is one reason why Christ came into the world.

“A child is born.” He shares the miracle of every child's birth. To every good mother, the newborn child in the crib is wonderful. There is not a more satisfying feeling, one of pride, one of joy and happiness, than the sight of your very own child for the first time. Fathers, I'm sure, as well as mothers, agree that this experience is unequal to any in the world. And thus, I believe, God knowing this sent Jesus Christ in the same manner, so this feeling could be experienced by all people. I might add that a very similar experience and feeling is felt when Jesus Christ is truly accepted by us into our lives. We experience joy, happiness, peace beyond knowing, and truly this experience is one of a miracle, likewise. It cannot be fully told but must be felt by the individual to really understand and appreciate. Certainly, every newborn child in the crib is wonderful to a mother. I said to a mother, intending to bring humor into the occasion as we look at her baby. “I suppose he will be a great man!” Her returned remark was deeply serious. “I wouldn't be surprised!”

“A child is born.” By every parent he is destined to become a great man. The great miracle of the New Testament is the fulfillment of that potential. The story of his life becomes a great miracle. Look at Jesus' ministry; even though it was short, - 3 years, look at all the good he did; healing people of disease, of infirmity, of sickness they had endured for many years. Look at the training his disciples received. Look at the power he possessed. Men were willing to leave everything to follow him. Look at the impact his life has had on the whole world for nearly 2000 years. Look at the results across the world. Billions of Christians, building many, many churches to worship God. This gospel story is now being told to all people everywhere. There could not possibly be any greater miracle.

There are many thoughts and questions raised about the birth and childhood and manhood of this Jesus.

How this baby became a man gathers great mystery! In him, there are great mysteries which occupy the minds of men. Was this child Pre-existent? Did he reveal God? Was he God upon the Earth? How could he be both God and man? And through the centuries, the questions are repeated. And all of the answers can be found in the Bible. Perhaps you cannot just pick this book up and start reading and find the answers to those questions and others immediately. It does take effort and time and study on our parts, but then too, God is willing to give us guidance as we read and study his word.

We, ourselves definitely need to consider the real meaning of Christmas. We desperately need to know this ourselves so we can explain it to our children. It has to mean more than bright lights and the exchanging of gifts. Suppose someone should come up to you as you leave the church after this service and say, "I am a stranger in this part of the world. Where I came from, no one has ever heard of Christmas. Can you tell me what it involves? I have never seen anything like it."

What would you say? Where would you begin? Would you begin, perhaps, right here with what and how we celebrate Christmas? Or would you go further back, to Bethlehem? If you wanted to tell the person what Christmas really means, you would have to go back even farther than that, perhaps not so much back of that as beyond that. You would have to begin with God. And I will tell you why. Christmas is the day on which God did something and unless you start from that, all the things you see happening on the streets and in the schools; in the houses and in the churches, make no sense. For Jesus Christ was truly the son of God and was born into this world for a specific purpose. We should think about what Christmas really is, and really means so that this time of year can be meaningful in our lives and the lives of our families.

"Unto us a child is born." "Unto is a dynamic and a directive word. It might be applied unto the life of the child period from Bethlehem, unto Nazareth, unto Galilee, unto Samaria, unto Judea, unto Calvary, unto the whole wide world, even unto us, here, in this church and community. The whole New Testament record is one of miracle. The whole New Testament becomes a gospel; a gospel for us to live by, a gospel for us to spread to everyone in this world of ours. On out into the world, the miracle of the Christ goes marching on in grace and power.

From our youth up we have heard about the decisive battles of history. But now Christmas comes again, engaging the thought and warming the heart of multitudes around the globe, and it concerns not a decisive battle but a decisive baby. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." Christmas suggests how much more decisive a baby can be than a battle. That is the miracle. Of Christmas - that a baby can be so decisive. "Unto us a child is born." It is true, is it not? The words of the ancient century are fulfilled in your hearts and in mine. Is this not a miracle?

# **The Greatest Miracle of the Old Testament**

## **Scripture: Exodus 14:8-18**

Text is chosen from Exodus 14:30, “Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians.”

Never a November passes without us hearing, in more or less detail, the story of the Pilgrims who held the first American Thanksgiving Day amid adversity and the threat of a cold and bitter New England winter. Whether or not we are sons and daughters of the “Mayflower”, the story is ours, a part of our American and Christian heritage. Truly, we do have a heritage we can be proud of; for those early American settlers were courageous and had more faith than we probably will ever have.

In a like manner, the story of God’s deliverance of the Israelites from the heavy hand of the Egyptian pharaoh and their track through the Great and Terrible Wilderness to a promised land belongs to the Jewish people, and through them to the Christians who share their Old Testament heritage.

The narrative of the Exodus is too long to recite in a single sermon, but the deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, which we read in our scripture reading this morning, was the great miracle which the Jewish people can and will never forget. In fact, the whole exodus story, from the day of their deliverance from Pharaoh to their settlement in the land of their fathers, was to the Israelites one of miracle, as it is to their descendants today.

As Israel lived out her history under the shadow of the Exodus, she came increasingly to see how completely God had described himself in that event. Let us come up this morning, try to see how completely God had described himself in this miracle of the Old Testament.

First, the gift of the Exodus is a God of persons. The intensity of God’s concern for human beings is nowhere more beautifully expressed than in the narrative that prepares the way for the exodus. From Exodus 3: 7-8 we read; “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” Surely God is a God of persons who will deliver us from all our afflictions if we have faith and believe in him. I know that God will never let us down. Perhaps, we all have to suffer and endure hardships through life, but in the end, God will be there to deliver us.

Second, the God of the Exodus is concerned for the helpless. In this act of God For Israel, one may also see the origin of the social gospel. This servant of God is concerned for persons, and especially for the helpless and needy, because that is the way God acts.

Ezekiel compared Israel in Egypt to a newborn baby, caked with blood and with the navel string uncut, cast

out in a field to die. In this abject and complete helplessness, the Lord found her and cared for her until she had grown to be a beautiful woman. This is found in Ezekiel 16: 1-14. Not the merit but the need calls forth the activity of God. Helpless, Israel could lay no claim upon him, nor had she power or beauty to attract him to her. It was Israel's very inability to help herself that moved God to deliver her.

God truly does act to help those who are in need and cannot help themselves. We Christians need to act in the same way, for there are those around us who are helpless, that need strength, courage, faith. We can help to bring them these things through the message of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Third - the God of the Exodus is the sovereign Lord of human history. He reached into Egypt, and in spite of her ancient wisdom and the chariots of the Pharaoh, brought out his people "with a mighty hand and outstretched arm."

In the dramatic scene at Belshazzar's feast, the writer of the Book of Daniel in Chapter 5, portrays God's rule in history. At the banquet table, groaning with rich foods and costly dishes, sit the mighty men of the empire: soldiers, statesman, and princes. The fate of the world and the destiny of nature seems to rest in the hands of these men. But while they revel, secure in their sense of power, a hand is writing silently on the plaster of the palace wall, "weighed and found wanting". According to the Hebrew faith, that terrible, silent judgment of God always writes the last word in human history.

It is true that kings and dictators have risen and fallen, and will rise and fall in the future, but in the end, God always has the last word. We, ourselves, definitely need to think of this when we think we have become a king and all powerful. It cannot last and it will not last, for God will have the last word.

Fourth - the God of the Exodus is a God who saves. His characteristic activity is deliverance. Note the recurring sentence in the narrative, "Let my people go." These are the words of guidance. The triumphant march of God of the Bible perpetually directs against every aggression or oppression that threatens to enslave or debase humans personally. The plagues in Egypt, as we can read in Exodus Chapters 7 through 11, the miraculous deliverance at the Sea of Weeds, as we read in Chapter 14 this morning, the giving of the manna and the quails in Chapter 16, and the water from the rock in chapter 17, are not mere wonder tales. They are heightening and emphasizing of the fundamental message of the narrative: the God of Israel is a God who saves. Our God can save us the same as he did the Israelites. He can save us from our sins, by our acceptance of him into our lives. He guarantees us eternal and everlasting life with him if we believe. A peace can come into our lives that is unbelievable. True, we will not be exempt from all hardships and the hard knocks in life, but I assure you we will be much better prepared to withstand them with God at our sides.

Fifth - the God of the Exodus, is a God the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan was led by a pillar of fire. In the later days of the exile, the belief that God would one day guide his people back to their land was a powerful source of comfort and hope. From Isaiah 35: 8; we read, "and a highway shall be there, and it shall be

called the Holy Way; the unclean. Shall not pass over it, and fools shall not enter therein. New Testament Christians also took heart from this characteristic of God. One of our most familiar hymns combines in a striking way the wilderness faith of the Old Testament with the Pilgrim faith of the new. "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, pilgrims through this barren land.

Sixth - the God of the Exodus is a God who provides. God did provide a way for the Israelites to escape from Egypt. He gave them protection when the people finally believed and had faith in him. This same God will provide for us today. He will give us protection and see that we are not harmed. There is evidence all around us that truly God has provided for us. Look at the trees, flowers, the seasons, the air we breathe, our families, our friends. Every blessing we have is a blessing provided by God. If we took time on this past Thanksgiving Day, we cannot but help realize that truly God has provided abundantly for us. Our part is not to forget and to appreciate where these blessings come from. We might also give thought to this: sometimes it seems that doing something is impossible. Then we stop and think that nothing is impossible with God. God does provide a way to do all things through him and for his name.

Seventh – the God of the Exodus is purposeful. His activity is directed to the establishment of a community devoted to God and dedicated to carrying out his will. By virtue of her encounter with God, Israel became a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Exodus 19:6 reads, "and you shall be to me a kingdom of priest and a holy nation. These are the words you shall speak to the children of Israel."

Israel and the church each believed that one particular and definite event in their historic past had shaped them and given them everything that was important in their community life. An event of such momentous consequences could not, however, be regarded as belonging wholly, or even mainly, in the past. It had to be in a real sense, the present possession of every generation of the community for all time.

The paradox of an event genuinely belonging to history, but being eternally experienced as a new thing, is expressed in both testaments by the word, "memory". Israel remembered how the Lord brought her out of Egypt. From Deuteronomy 8:2, we read, "and you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandment, or not." The Christian takes the bread and wine in remembrance that Christ died for him. From 1st Corinthians 11:24-25, we read, "and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "this is my body which is for you, do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper saying, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Both the Old and the New Testaments have their distinctive formulative event, which imparts its significance and power to every other. In the Old Testament, it is the exodus from Egypt, which we have been discussing this morning; in the New Testament, it is the event of Christ from the Christian point of view stand in a promise - fulfillment relationship to each other, that which was implied and suggested in the exodus coming to its full reality and meaning in Christ. Both are events in human history. God formed Israel

in slavery in the Egypt of. Rameses II, and brought her through “the great and terrible wilderness to her homeland. Jesus Christ was born in the empire of Caesar Augustus in the days of Herod the King. God acts where men are, in the confusion and struggle of historical events. Both events issue in the formulation of the of a community. The Exodus made Israel; the Christ event produced the church. Both events constitute a gospel, a saving message which the saved community proclaims, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the House of bondage.” It occupies a place in the Old Testament faith similar to that held in Christianity by Paul’s conviction; “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” Truly this miracle in the Old Testament can never be forgotten any more than the birth of Jesus Christ can be forgotten. Christians have a special place in their memories for both events.

## **The Song of the Vineyard**

### **Scripture: Isaiah 5:1-8, 11, 18-23**

The text is chosen from Isaiah 5:25, “For all this his anger is not turned away and his hand is stretched out still.”

In ancient Palestine, the season when the grapes were gathered was one of festival. It looked back to the springtime when the vineyardist had touched the swelling buds, saying, “Beloved be the creator. He is the Supreme Giver. May he protect the blessed increase.” Now that blessed increase is purple on the vines or gathered into the winepress. Their grapes are full of juices. It is a season of gaiety. The men in their bare feet tread the grapes in the stone flagged vat. They exchanged their songs and stories.

The 5th chapter of Isaiah begins like a vintage song. But this is much more than a seasonal song. It is burdened with sympathy. It shares the emotions of God; for it belongs to the grandeur of God that he feels - he has delight, he suffers, he becomes angry, he loves. The events of the world are his concerns. His special concern, in the prophet's poem, is Israel. Israel was Jehovah's vine. God had brought Israel out of Egypt and established it in Palestine. In the 80th Psalm, verses 8-16, we read; “Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt.” “Thou hast - planted it. Thou prepared room before it, and didn't cause it to take root, and it filled the land.” And so Israel was God's vine.

The prophet, Isaiah, in his poem, in our scripture reading this morning, shares God's love for Israel. Its first lines expresses his sympathy with God, “Now I will sing to my beloved, my friend,” a song concerning his vineyard. The vineyardist is God. The vineyard is Israel. The vineyard lay “on a very fertile hill” - an ideal location. Perhaps just like this soil in our valley, fertile and rich, the best in the country. The owner. “fenced it.” He built a wall about it. In other words, he possessed his possession. With what pride he enclosed that sunny hillside. The owner would not neglect his vineyard. Such ownership is ideal. The same way any one of you would not neglect your land in this valley. You want every inch of it to be productive. “He gathered out the stones thereof.”

What a wearisome task to dig up a Palestinian acre and clear it of stones! But this vineyard was to be idle for cultivation. And believe me, it is a wearisome task to clear an acre of stones. Then he planted his vineyard with the choicest vines. The name of the stock was ‘Sorek’, after a village near Jerusalem, famous for its vineyards. The finest vine stock - ideal in its heredity. This, we know is a must, if we want to grow a good harvest, with the most yield per acre, we have to plant the best seeds. He built a watchtower in the middle of it. The watchers would drive away the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines. This we can read from Song of Solomon 2:15; “Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.” This watchtower was ideal for protection. “He also made it, hewed out, a winepress there in; and he looked that it should bring forth grapes.” An ideal expectation for God had really prepared his vineyard. There was nothing else he could do. It should really produce the best grapes. Let us hesitate to recite the last



line of this stanza of the song. First, we shall read in the next stanza: “What could have been done more to my vineyard than I have not done to it? In other words, what more could God have actually done for Israel? Let the men of ancient Israel answer the question.

I believe this is a good question to ask ourselves, here in America. “What more can God do for America?” God has allowed this country to become the richest country in the world, but what is actually happening - moral decline, alcoholics, narcotics, crime of all kinds on the rise, everything bad that you can think of or mention we have plenty of in this country. Do you really think God is going to let this go on forever? I know that he isn't. It's about time we came to our senses. And realize what road we are going down. It isn't too late. If we turn around now and head in the right direction. God can help us and show us the way to go.

Getting back to Israel poem. We have the tragic lines of the first stanza: “He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes!” This was Israel's response to the loving care of God - wild grapes! Everything that God had done for the people of Israel meant nothing to them, for they went on their merry way doing all kinds of acts that didn't meet God's standards.

Perhaps we ought to take a look at our own country today and sort of compare it to Israel. I'm sure you will agree that, in general, the Lord has been very good to the people of America over the years. The Lord has been very patient with us, giving us time to find the error of our ways and make the necessary corrections. But it seems that we get deeper and deeper and more involved in sin as time goes by. If we think this is incorrect, all we have to do is read the figures. More crime is being committed than ever, more unwed mothers, more alcoholics, more dope addicts, more and more stress being put on material things, less concerned for the people of the world that are starving each day. I wonder how much longer God can be patient with us?

Israel was the vineyard the Lord had planted. He looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. He looked for it to yield justice, but it yielded to perversion of justice. He looked for it to yield righteousness, but it yielded outrage. What will the vineyardist do to his vineyard? What would you do in the same circumstances? Would you breakdown the protesting hedge and wall, and let the beasts come in to devour what they will? Would you cease to prune and to hoe lest you bring fruitage a greater vintage of will and bitter grapes? Would you let the weeds and thistles grow where you planted the Sorek vine? And if you had opened ditches, and sluiceways that the water might irrigate the land, would you not let them fall into disrepair and disuse? Look to this country, which is sometimes called God's country. God has been very patient with this vineyard. Who is wise enough to know what he will do with America? Shall her greed, drunkenness, lust, flippancy, iniquity, pride, corrupting injustices, bring her to the destiny which she deserves? It is a question not what God will do, but what we shall do. What shall we do?

Either we collapse in despair or rise in faith. We die in our own sins, or we live by the grace of God. By repentance, we turned from despair to faith, from death to life. Isaiah, who brings us in a song to the depths of despair, lifts us by another quiet word to the pinnacle of hope: from Isaiah 30: 15; we read; “for

thus sayeth the Lord God, the holy one of Israel: in returning and rest shall ye be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.” Turning and returning to God, I believe, is the only hope we have. The Prophet in his poem shares God’s sorrow, indignation, anger. The poem moves out of the first person in which Isaiah speaks to the third person in which God speaks (versus 3-6). Is there any concern like God’s concern for his people? Is there any sorrow like God sorrow? Is there any disappointment, like God’s disappointment?

This love song almost breaks the heart of one who looks intently upon the figure of the patient, expectant, sacrificial planter, who is so poignantly disappointed. Isaiah has used his keenest facilities in presenting all the angles of the tragic picture. Careful selection, diligent preparation, wise planting, and ardent wishing characterize his activities in return for all his effort and sacrifice. Only stinking, worthless grapes appear. Quickly, the preacher turns the application to his neighbors. In Judah, God’s heart is weeping because he looked for justice and righteousness but found bloodshed and the frantic cry of distress. What a harvest to reap in return for all the love and sacrifice expended.

When the prophet speaks again his sympathies are so bound up with the emotions of God that the words of Isaiah and the words of God are intermingled. Shame! Woe! Recompence! Therefore. Draw a parallel with us today. First, is the shame of greed and covetousness. The evil passions for possessions. Second, the shame of drunkenness. Third, the shame of flippant indifference to God. Fourth, the shame of unquity where people doubt whether God will really punish, and they challenge God to do anything to them. Fifth, the shame of moral blindness. Six, the shame of pride and seventh, the shame of corrupting justice. In other words, being bribed to declare the wicked acquitted or to take away righteousness, that is to declare the innocent guilty. Israel’s cup is full and running over, with wine made of wild and bitter grapes.

Are we going to end the song of the vineyard, with its accompanying series of woes, as Isaiah brings it to an end? Though Israel may deserve to move on to her inevitable doom, is the great loving God to be eternally disappointed? Is the great vineyardists loving concern for his vineyard never to be rewarded with a cup of sweet wine? Are we going to let this happen to America when we ourselves have the power within us to change it? I believe that we will wake up one of these fine days and again return to God and repent. Not here in this chapter, but in another one we read “the song of God’s dream.” Isaiah now shares in the grace of God. From Isaiah 27: 2-6, we read; “In that day sing me unto her, a vineyard of red wine. I, the Lord, do keep it; and I will water it every moment: lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day; fury is not in me - Israel shall blossom and live, and fill the face of the world with fruit.”

How far is the land rising towards the intentions of the author? Does it produce those fruits of righteousness, for which alone God cares? On this depends whether the civilization is secure, as well as the right of the people to enjoy and feel proud of it. From Isaiah 30:15; there is a word to Israel, a word to America, and a word to all those bringing forth wild grapes. “In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”

We in America have much to be thankful for, thankful to God. We cannot be complacent, indifferent and have the feeling we ourselves have made us what we are. Truly, God has provided abundantly for us. We are the most prosperous nation in the world. We are the leaders. And because we are, we need to set the example for other nations. As small as each individual may think he is compared to the whole, a change has to start with you and with me. One person truly accepting God into his life can spread to those around you, and thus by mass witnessing, this world, can someday become God's Kingdom. Don't wait for someone else, accept God and Jesus Christ now and just see what a difference he can make in your life and thus eventually throughout this whole world. Truly God is our only hope.



# Ways In Which B.F.C. Serves the Community



Many of us struggle with stress, depression, our weight, and other debilitating issues. "Living the Interior Life" is a program that teaches the individual affirmative prayer, meditation techniques, cognitive behavior therapy, overcoming addiction, physical exercise and proper nutrition. In addition, we offer guidelines on how you can learn to effectively apply these principles in your life daily & with God's grace overcome many of life's difficulties that until now you just simply believed you had to live with. Learn to overcome many difficulties and be liberated from them forever. We offer monthly workshops that are available in your church or organization. Call for our free booklet or schedule a convenient time that we can meet to discuss the benefits of this program to your congregation or organization. We are available anytime to serve your needs.

In 1985, Braman began to witness his recovery from addiction in the New York State Correctional Facilities. Braman has presented programs since that time in many facilities including : Greenhaven, Fishkill, Downstate, Summit, and several local and county jails. It is a thorough program using the 12 step method of recovery, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Meditation techniques as well as a program for dealing with violent behavior. In addition, our program helps to provide clarity concerning the negative learned behavior that unfortunately comes out of some families. If you are a correctional facilities administrator please contact us to schedule a convenient time when we can meet to discuss the program. If you are an inmate please contact your counselor to request a copy of our free booklet. There is no need to continue to live in a manner that does not contribute to the well being of yourself and society. Write, call, fax, or email us. May your lives be blessed as you seek greater heights of awareness. Peace to you.

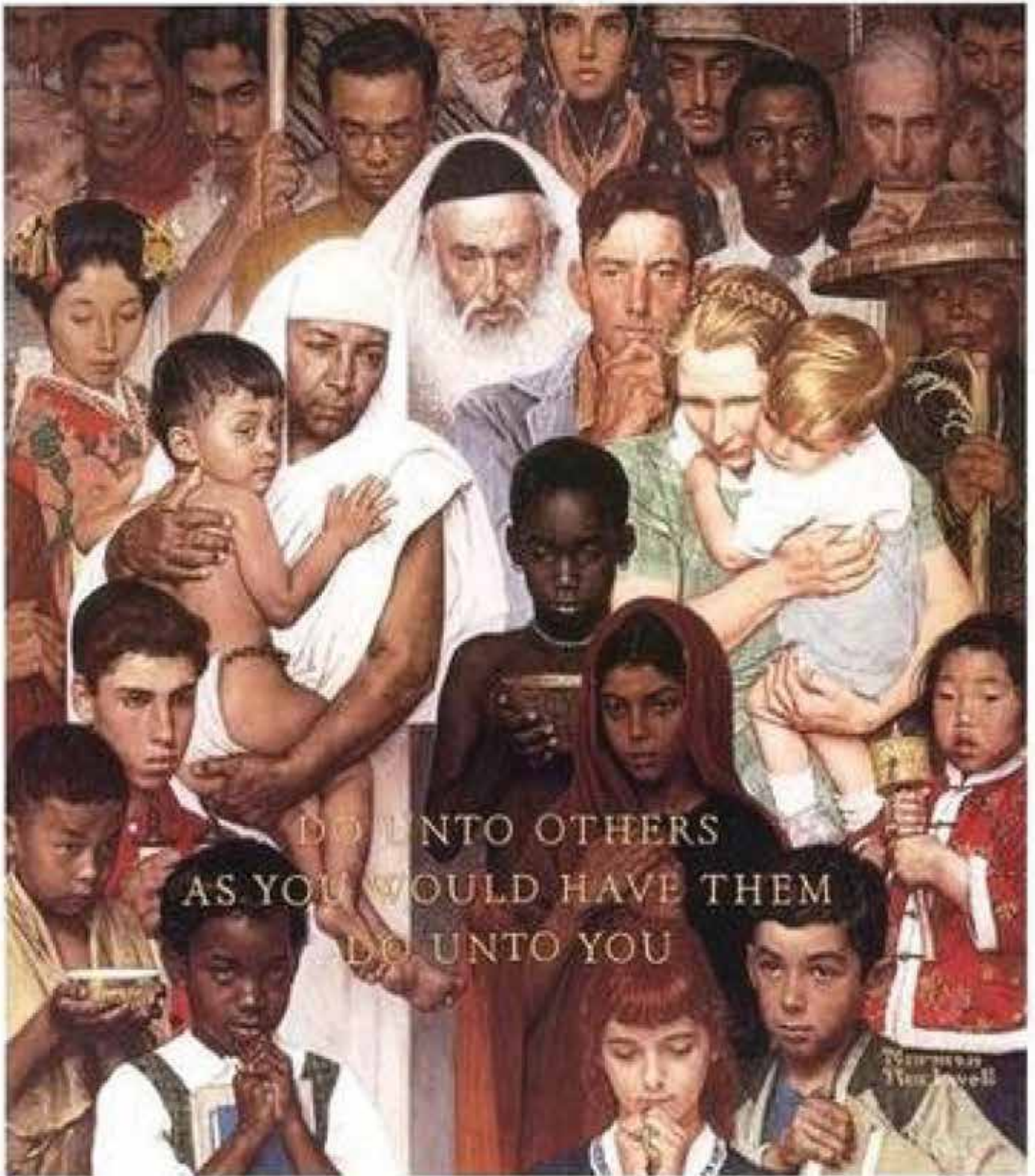


Millions of us suffer needlessly from addiction & depression. The reasons for this are many. In this program we emphasize the 12 step method of Recovery, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Meditation techniques to overcome difficulties. We also rely on God's grace to help you be lifted from your dilemma. If you or a friend or loved one suffers from difficulties surrounding addiction or depression please contact us for our free booklet. In addition we are available to schedule a convenient time when we can present a workshop for your organization to study these principles. All of the principles really are not new, but when presented together in one workbook and when applied in one's life, miracles can occur. Be sure to call, email, write, or fax us. May you be blessed as you seek greater joy & a truly happy life.

Learn about the journey of Love for some of the children in the state of Assam, India. In 1944 the late Julia Rose founded a school and boarding facility called Asapalli (A Village of Hope). Learn how you, your church or organization can donate to support the children of Asapalli. Write, fax, or e-mail for your free booklet: "A Tribute to Asapalli". In addition, it would be our pleasure to talk with you or give a presentation to your church or organization. Call us anytime. Many blessings to you.



Located Southwest of Calcutta, India, Orissa is the home of "Human Care Trust". Learn about our fellow brothers and sisters who struggle to provide education, healthcare, and economic enlistment to the people in the state of Orissa. Read about a few young individuals who have formed "Human Care Trust" and have devoted their lives to helping their fellow brothers and sisters. A free booklet is available upon your request by email, letter, fax or phone. We would be happy to schedule a convenient time when we can meet to present "Our Friends of Orissa" to your church or organization. We thank you!



***NORMAN ROCKWELL***  
**"DO UNTO OTHERS"**