

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, January 1, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

2 KINGS 5:12

“Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?
Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?”

MODERN SUBSTITUTES FOR CHRIST

Our world today is oppressed by two sinister and terrifying forces -- speed and fear.

1. Speed. I reminded you recently that George Washington, living 200 years ago, could not travel any faster than horses could 3,500 years ago. For thousands of years a galloping horse was the fastest means of locomotion known to man. Yet today, people hurtle through the air at fantastic speeds, orbiting the earth at 18,000 miles per hour -- five miles per second! In Washington’s day Europe was a ten-week journey away by sailing vessel. Yet tonight from Dulles Airport, amid, the comfort of modern air travel, you can make that same journey to London in less than seven hours.

One hundred years ago it took weeks for letters to pass from one nation to another. If strife arose, the time it took for communications to pass allowed tempers to cool and quarrels to be healed. But today, when anything happens in the world of international relations, news of it is flashed from New York to London and Tokyo in a matter of seconds. Our world today is a very small place, a global village in which there can be no such thing as isolation; for the concerns of any one nation are the concerns of the whole world. And we have got to learn to live together as nations, or else endure the unspeakable consequences.

Speed is a sinister and terrifying force in the world today. But so is

2. Fear. On August 6, 1945, a bomb was dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima which in 30 seconds killed 50,000 people, maimed for life another 50,000, and rendered one million people homeless. It doesn’t sound much when you say it quickly, does it? But just try for a moment to picture in your mind that devastated city, and then remember that a 1989 nuclear weapon could create at least 1,000 times as much devastation as did that 1945 model.

And today our scientists are frightened men. They know that now we are like children in a nursery playing with razor blades and nitric acid bottles. We have advanced scientifically, but have we advanced morally and spiritually to the extent where we can control this Frankenstein, this creature of our own contriving which could so easily turn upon us and rend us? SPEED and FEAR.

In our text, we find Naaman, the four-star general of the Syrian Army, complaining bitterly. You see, Naaman was a leper, and he had come to the Jewish prophet Elisha to be cured. But Elisha hadn’t even troubled to come out of his house to greet his eminent visitor. He had

simply sent him this message by his servant, “Go and wash yourself seven times in the River Jordan, and you will be cured.”

Naaman was completely enraged. “He thinks I’ll bathe in that dirty mud puddle Jordan?!” he roared. “What about Abana and Pharpar, the great clean rivers of my own country? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?”

Naaman might praise enthusiastically his Abana and Pharpar; but the one question which really mattered was -- could they make a leper clean? Obviously, they couldn’t.

Today this old story of Naaman is so up-to-date that it challenges each one of us; for our generation has attempted to substitute certain modern Abanas and Pharpars for Jesus Christ, in the futile attempt to heal the ills of mankind. But the question is: Do these substitutes for Christ have the power to cleanse and regenerate the lives of men and women, and nations?

One of the proffered substitutes for Christ is

1. Education. So often it is accepted as self-evident today that if only the peoples of the world would be properly educated, then they would have the wisdom to settle all personal and international problems, and the new age, characterized by enduring peace and prosperity, would dawn.

Please don’t misunderstand me. I am not belittling education. Speaking for myself, I delight, in whatever spare time I can muster, to explore those seemingly endless vistas of knowledge to which, as yet, I am a stranger. Without education, civilization would wither and perish.

But, education, knowledge, culture, by itself, can never save one individual, let alone the world.

The world community castigated Germany for launching World War II; Germany, the cradle of the Protestant Reformation; Germany, that great nation which during the past 100 years was unsurpassed educationally and scientifically. But theological liberalism and secular humanism, which left God out of account, became the dominating force in the life of the intelligentsia; and 6 million Jews went to the gas chambers.

But here we are in the USA in 1989 -- educated, prosperous, powerful -- in many ways the envy of the world. Now I love my country, and I hope you do too, but with all of our education, what do we do?

- We destroy 6 million little unborn babies every four years.
- We are the most crime-infested nation on the face of the earth.
- We have experienced a sexual revolution which has opened the door to the spread of AIDS which will cause indescribable catastrophe within the next decade.

- We are being destroyed by a drug culture which it seems impossible to curtail.

Paul Harvey, in a thought-provoking article in this month's Reader's Digest (January 1989), points out that China, in the 19th century, went through exactly what we are going through today with regard to the use of drugs. He writes:

In the early 1800s, China was among the wealthiest, most self-sufficient nations on earth. Its rulers had governed for centuries under an ancient system of ethics set down by the followers of Confucius... Drug smugglers established their headquarters in a southern city. In a matter of years, their poison had seeped into virtually every town and village via a web-like distribution system that flourished under the noses of judges, politicians and police -- sometimes even with their assistance. Some intellectuals initially extolled the psychic and medicinal benefits of drugs and minimized their harm. Ironically, these intellectuals, along with the rich and privileged, were the first to succumb... Britain discovered China's secret taste for opium and began shipping it into the country from British fields in India. The pernicious drug had been severely restricted by law in 1729, but as imports rose, some scholar-officials argued that opium should be "decriminalized," and its distribution regulated by the government... In the final stages of the plague, addicts whom drugs did not kill outright became susceptible to infectious diseases, which they unwittingly spread to loved ones. And in time this once great and noble nation was so withered that it fell victim to countries a fraction of its size.

My friends, if that catastrophe could befall educated China, it could most certainly befall educated America, for education without God can bring death.

"But," says someone, "what about

2. **Modern Science.** Is this not the answer to man's need?" Now we must never despise modern science and its wonderful achievements and the instruments for good it has created.

Mahatma Gandhi used to say to his disciples, "We must have nothing whatever to do with the culture or scientific inventions of the Western world. We must maintain in its pristine purity our own Indian and Hindu culture." But one day Gandhi was overcome with violent abdominal pain. They rushed him to a hospital where he was X-rayed, and then laid on an operating table, whereupon a surgeon, using the skills and instruments of Western medical science, proceeded to snip out his appendix!

But what can we say about the miracle of computer technology and the revolution it has created in scientific research and in the quality of life on our planet? But that same scientific research has also produced the intercontinental ballistic missile, and the hydrogen bomb. Today, as I have said, we are like children playing with deadly toys. We have advanced scientifically, but we have not kept pace morally, and the result could be inconceivable disaster.

In June 1939, a young African student graduated BA with first-class honors and gold

medal at the University of London. When on September 3rd he stepped off the ship which had brought him back home and was greeted with the news that war had broken out in Europe, he made this sardonic comment, "It looks as though I have escaped from civilization just in time!"

Modern science, apart from God, could easily spell death, and you know it, and I know it!

Another supposed panacea for the ills of mankind is

3. Modern Psychology. Now psychology, like other aspects of modern science, can bestow great benefits. One has only to think of the multitudes of people who have found release from functional disorders and illnesses and even organic disease when they have received the benefit of psychiatric treatment from doctors who come to their work with a truly Christian approach.

But there are some earnest, though mistaken souls, who would tell us that to study the workings of the human mind, to learn about our instincts and emotions, to discover how and why we behave as we do, will inevitably make us better people, and thus, in the long run, create a new world of individuals gloriously emancipated from all their phobias and complexes.

Sigmund Freud, as you know, was the father of psychoanalysis. And although Freud's diagnosis of many of our psychological maladies may be quite correct, nevertheless the prescriptions he gave for delivering people from their psychological illnesses have proved relatively ineffective. In a word, Freud may have understood what makes us psychological basket cases, but he did not come up with an effective way to make us well. Insight into what ails us does not necessarily cure us.

I think of a lady who went to a Freudian psychiatrist. She was suffering from a nervous breakdown. In the course of many interviews he questioned her, probed deep into her past, and finally enabled her to draw forth, from the depths of her unconscious mind, the thing that was causing all the trouble; and then, holding it up, as it were, before her eyes, he said, "You did that; there is the root of all your trouble." It was actually the memory of an old sin committed years before. She had pushed the memory of it far down into her unconscious mind, where it had festered, and produced the condition of nervous breakdown. Confronted with the truth about herself she said, "What can I do?" He replied, "Oh, since you now know the cause of your distress, you must try to forget it; live as though it had never happened. By bringing it out into the open, it will be like a weed which withers and dies when you pull it out of the ground." "But I can't forget it," she replied; "I feel dirty inside. How can I get relief from a guilty conscience?" Psychology, by itself, has no answer to give to that most insistent of all questions. Psychology can expose, but it cannot forgive.

A fourth remedy offered to a sick world is

14. The Study of History. Some intellectuals today would say, "Make a careful study of the past; steep yourself in history. Learn how people lived and acted in the past. Learn from their mistakes as well as from their achievements. The intelligent study of history will help solve many of our international problems."

One is reminded of the cynical remark made by Hegel, the German philosopher. Said he, "The only thing men learn from history is that men don't learn from history!" We keep on making the same mistakes our forefathers made. Hitler studied history. He modelled himself on Napoleon with what terrifying results.

So, there you have it.

Education can train the mind, but it cannot change the heart.

Modern science has nothing to help people morally.

Psychology cannot satisfy the soul's deep need for forgiveness. And

The study of history cannot keep us from making the same old mistakes people have always made.

You see, the rock on which all our modern substitutes for the Gospel go to pieces is the basic fact of sin. The plain fact is that there is a twist in us, an inbred bias toward wrongdoing. Sometimes we are appalled at the things we think and say and do. But it just goes to prove that sin has its roots sunk deep into the soil of our lives.

And no one can fulfil his true nature and destiny until sin's twist and bias have been met and dealt with; that is to say, until his personality has been transformed, until the "dirty" has been made "clean," until repentance has been followed by forgiveness, or as Jesus Himself put it - until he is "born from above" (John 3:3).

When we are truly honest with ourselves, we really have to admit that we are a bit "dirty inside." Indeed, if God were to place a placard on your back recording the ten worst things you have ever thought or said or done, who of us would not blush with shame?

But that is precisely why the Lord Jesus Christ came to earth, to deal with our sin by dying for it on a Cross. And because He took our place, and died to make atonement for our sins, a holy God can now accept us back into His family if we come to Him through Christ, and in repentance and faith.

He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good;
That we might go at last to Heaven,
Saved by His precious blood.
There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of Heaven, and let us in.

That is the only message that can really enable you to live with yourself, with your neighbor, and with God. And in the long run, it is the only remedy that can heal a sin-sick world.

And that is the message and the remedy that I will continue to proclaim throughout 1989 and so long as God extends to me the privilege of preaching Christ and Him crucified.

AMEN.