

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 7, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 4:17

“From that time Jesus began to preach, saying,
‘Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

WHERE REVIVAL MUST BEGIN

When John the Baptist went out preaching, his message was “Repent.” (Matthew 13:2). When our Lord began His ministry, His message was “Repent” (Matthew 4:17). When He sent His disciples out to preach, their message was “Repent” (Mark 6:12). On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached repentance (Acts 2:38). Paul preached repentance in Athens (Acts 20:21). The last message of our Lord to the Church was not the Great Commission contained in Matthew 28:16-20. The last thing our Lord said to the Church is contained in His seven letters to the Churches, found in Revelation 2 and 3, and His message is “Repent.”

He did not say to the Church at Ephesus, “What you need is a more vigorous evangelistic program.” He said, “Repent.” He didn’t say to Pergamos and Thyatira, “What you need is to step up your missionary activity.” He just said, “Repent; do something about Balaam and Jezebel.” He didn’t say to Sardis, “What you need is more tithers.” He just said, “Repent.” He didn’t say to the Church at Laodicea, “What you need is more emphasis on the Social Gospel.” He said, “Get over your lukewarmness; be zealous, and Repent.”

Have you noticed in our Lord’s messages to the Churches in Revelation the five alternatives to repentance: “Repent or else I will remove, I will fight, I will kill, I will come as a thief, I will spew you out of my mouth.” That doesn’t sound like Jesus, but He said it, and these are the consequences that befall unrepentant Christians.

Almost nothing is ever said today about repentance on the part of professing Christians - getting right with God and man; but until we get some of God’s people right, we can’t hope to get sinners regenerated.

Preaching repentance is a thankless job, and few preachers want to tackle it. Dr. Joseph Parker once said, “The man whose sermon is ‘Repentance’ sets himself against the age and will be battered mercilessly by the age whose moral tone he challenges. There’s only one end for such a man,” he said, “Off with his head!” And Dr. Parker said, “You had better not preach repentance until you’ve pledged your head to heaven!”

I believe the Church has to repent. Many of those whose names are on some Church rolls show absolutely no sign of having been born again. And let me say that if you are today what you’ve always been, you’re not a Christian. A Christian is someone brand new. “If anyone be in

Christ, he is a new creation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17). That doesn’t mean that you must have had some cataclysmic emotional experience. You may have come to Christ quietly in your home, or as a child in Sunday School; but there must have been a time when old things passed away and all things became new. I could have led some people to Christ if they hadn’t joined a church. They got in a church, and that was the end of it -- and now they say, “*You* don’t mean me. I’m in.” But they are not born again.

And then there are those in the Church who are living in sin of one kind or another. When Joshua came back from Ai, where the Israelite army had been ignominiously defeated, and when he lay on his face before God, God said, “Get up -- this is no time for a prayer meeting. Israel has sinned; you need to point out the man who is at the bottom of all this.” And all the prayer meetings in the world won’t take care of the situation unless and until we deal with sin in our individual lives and in the Church.

When Paul wrote to Corinth there was plenty wrong with the Church there, and Paul could have adopted that lovely attitude that is so popular today. He could have said, “Well, I know you’ve got a man living with the wrong woman; and people are getting drunk at the Lord’s Table; and believers are taking each other to court; and some of you are chasing around after pet preachers, and all the rest of it; but I like to look on the bright side. There’s a lot of sin, but I’m going to overlook it. We’ve got a lot of good Christians in Corinth, and I like to accentuate the positive.” Well, he didn’t talk like that at all. In the first half of 1 Corinthians, as Campbell Morgan says, Paul dealt with the carnalities; and then he dealt with the spiritualities in the latter half.

I hear it said today, “All you have to do is preach Love.” But if all you have to do is preach “Love,” why did Paul wait till the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians before he ever got around to love? Why didn’t he start out with love in chapter one?

I know too that people say, “Well, there aren’t any perfect churches.” That’s right. We’re not talking about perfect churches; we’re talking about New Testament churches; and those churches had a standard, and when they fell below the standard, something was done about it.

I believe in standards. We have standard time. You don’t get up in the morning and just take off on whatever time happens to appeal to you. We have standard pitch in music. The choir doesn’t get up on Sunday morning and everybody take off on whatever note they happen to think of first. I’ve been in churches where you’d think they did, but it didn’t make very good music!! You have to have a standard, and the New Testament has a standard; and it is my conviction that we are trying to evangelize today with an un-awakened and undedicated Church.

The Church can do many things after she repents, but she can do nothing until she repents. There was a time when the issues were clearly defined; but nowadays black and white have been smudged into an indefinite gray; and one traitor inside the Church can do more harm than 500 enemies from outside. We’ve been infiltrated by the world, the flesh and the devil; and the devil is not fighting churches today -- he’s joining them. He can do more harm as a church member than he ever could do on the outside. There’s plenty wrong today, and it needs to be dealt with in the New Testament way.

I know there are those who say, “Perhaps our linen isn’t spotless. But the robes of Christ (which we have put on by faith) are dazzling enough.” Now that sounds convincing, but it’s misleading. After all, the Church at Sardis was commended because they had a few who had not defiled their garments. God expects us to keep our garments white. We’re to be unspotted from the world. I know that “Christ is our Righteousness,” and we are commanded by faith to “put on the Lord Jesus,” but I don’t believe in righteousness on you if it isn’t in you. It needs to be in us as well as upon us. I believe that our position in Christ and our condition in the world, and our standing in heaven and our state down here on earth ought to correspond.

I know that we can’t live faultless lives -- God never expects anybody to live a faultless life; but you can live a blameless life. If a little child writes a letter and does the best he can, it’s not a faultless letter, but it’s a blameless letter. The Church is going to be without spot or wrinkle one day when Christ returns, but it can be blameless now. I believe in putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, yes; but the very next line says, “Make no provision for the flesh.”

Some say, “Why don’t you just preach the grace of God?” I believe in preaching the grace of God, but what does the grace of God make a man do? It teaches him that “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts he should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world,” looking for Jesus to come back. Some say, “Don’t preach so many commandments; just preach the promises of God.” Well, I believe in preaching the promises of God, but “having these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” They say we’re not to judge. I grant you we’re not to judge our fellows. “The Lord knoweth those who are His.” I’m glad He does, otherwise some of them would be mighty hard to identify! But it goes on to say, “Let everyone who names the Name of Christ depart from iniquity.”

Dr. A. N. Tozer once wrote, “The popular notion that the first obligation of the Church is to spread the Gospel to the uttermost part of the earth is false. Her first obligation is to be spiritually worthy to spread it. Our Lord said, “Go ye”; but He also said, “Tarry ye till you’re ready to go.” The first business of the Church is not to evangelize. The first business of the Church is to get ready to evangelize. Trying to excite an unprepared, undedicated mob of church members to rush into a business they’re not ready for is ridiculous. We’ve got a Gideon’s army of 32,000 running around today, a carnal, mixed multitude, not prepared for spiritual warfare.

Jesus said, “You shall be My witnesses.” He did not say, “You shall bear witness.” There’s a vast difference between bearing witness and being a witness. Talking is not being (necessarily). You can talk it and not have it. You’ve got to be a witness; and if you are one, you will witness.

The Word of God says, “It is time for Thee, Lord, to work”; and it also says, “Sow to yourselves in righteousness; reap in mercy. Break up your fallow ground. It is time to seek the Lord till He come and rain righteousness upon you” (Hosea 10:12).

“It is time for Thee, Lord, to work” — that’s God’s business.

“It is time to seek the Lord” — that’s our business.

I like that homely old phrase, “Break up your fallow ground.” You know what fallow ground is. It’s ground that has lain idle and uncultivated till it’s covered with weeds and is unproductive. Now it is unproductive because it has been undisturbed. And unless our churches are disturbed and unless God’s people are disturbed, and the ground is broken up, we’re not going to have a crop.

My mother-in-law had her washing machine serviced once, and the man said, “Mrs. Geddis, you need a new agitator.” The agitator is what gets the clothes clean! Sometimes, on your medicine bottle, you read, “Shake well before using.” That’s what God has to do with His people sometimes: He has to agitate them, so that they will seek repentance and cleansing and be brought back into the center of His will.

Why, in these days, is the Church of Christ not experiencing revival as it should? Dr. R. A. Torrey used to say that if the average church member knew what a revival really means he’d say, “Lord, keep us from having a revival.” Revival means getting right with God and man. Revival means conviction of sin on the part of Christians, not sinners. Sinners have nothing to do with a revival. The conversion of the lost is a product of revival. But if there is to be a revival in the New Testament sense, there must be conviction of sin on the part of Christians; there must be confession of sin, and absolute renunciation of sin -- “He that covereth his sin shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh it shall have mercy.” It means making Jesus Lord, and it means being filled with the Holy Spirit. That is revival. And Christians today don’t seem to know much about it.

Perhaps here today there are husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, who need to go home and experience revival under your own roof. Some of you have been speaking and acting selfishly and unkindly toward each other; and you’ve got to go home and set wrongs right. Maybe there are young people here who haven’t been acting as Christians ought to toward your parents. You can stand and sing till doomsday, “O how I love Jesus,” but if you don’t know how to behave at home, then you’re not ready to sing it. Sometimes you parents need to apologize to your children for things you’ve said or done. You may have “provoked” your children to “wrath.” There’s a lot of apologizing needs to be done today -- apologizing to other people for things you have said to them or about them. How long has it been since you’ve ever admitted you were wrong about anything? That’s a very hard thing to do, but the best sign of revival is when Christians start squaring up their accounts not only with God but with other people.

Picture in your mind an old mill in the country operated by a waterwheel. The stream flows down and turns the wheel and the mill operates. But suppose the miller would come down some morning and the big wheel wouldn’t turn. There wasn’t enough water. How foolish he would be to get down and try to turn the wheel himself! How foolish to call in the neighbors to try to turn the wheel and operate the mill! But I’ll tell you what he could do -- he could go up the creek and clear away the debris and the obstructions, and the dead logs, and deepen the channel, and then the water would flow and the wheel would turn, and the mill would operate, and he’d be back in business!

Tell me -- are you straining and striving in the attempt to make the wheel go 'round? It's an exercise in futility and frustration. What you need to do is to go up the creek and get things out of your life so that the water will flow, and the wheel will turn, and the mill will operate.

All the wonderful things you read about in the Acts of the Apostles were simply the outflow and the overflow of the inflow of the Spirit of God -- nothing more, just that. You cannot be a channel of blessing if your heart is not free from known sin. We need to go up the creek. All the study courses, and all the crusades, and all the promotional gimmicks will never bring revival -- not till we go up the creek.

Dr. J. H. Jowett used to say that you're not always doing the most business for God when you're busiest. Most of us ought to do less for God and let Him do more through us! There's a big difference. He's not really interested in what we do for Him. He wants to work in us to will and to do of His good pleasure. Somebody has said that our responsibility is just our response to His ability! I don't mean by that that you pass the buck to God and don't do anything. You'll work harder than you ever did, but it will be the outflow and the overflow of the inflow of the Spirit of God.

Don't you need to go up the creek? How long has it been since you've cleared the channel between you and God? How long has it been since you dealt with whatever clogs the flow of divine power?

- Is it a sin of omission? - "The good that I would, I do not."
- Is it a sin of commission? — "The evil that I would not, that I do."
- Is it a sin of disposition? - "Let us cleanse ourselves of all filthiness of the flesh and spirit."
- Is it a doubtful thing in your life? - "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin."
- Is it something to do with your body or your mind? Are you sinning in your body? Is your mind a temple or is it a tavern?
- Is it some old dirty habit?
- What about your prayer life? Is it fresh and vital?
- Are you into God's Word every day, and finding genuine delight in it?
- Are you stealing from God by not giving the tithe of your income?

Really, revival is God's side of the coin. You can't do much about that. But repentance is the other side of the coin, and you can do something about that. "God commandeth all men everywhere to repent." And repentance, as the converted army sergeant said, just means, "Halt! About turn! Quick march!" It means calling a halt to the way you've been living in a miserably defeated condition. It means turning away with godly sorrow from anything that crucifies Jesus

afresh and puts Him to an open shame. And it means starting out to walk on a new road and in a different direction as you obey Christ and make Him Lord of every single department of your life.

We do need to go up the creek and get things out of our lives -- some of these things may be in your family life, or in your business life, in your social life, in your personal life. I don't know, but God and you know.

Are you willing to say this morning, "Lord, I'm ready to go up the creek, and get anything out of the way that is blocking the almighty power of God? I'm not justifying myself -- I'm judging myself, willingly, because the only thing I'm interested in from here on out is that there may be the inflow and the outflow and the overflow of the Spirit of God in my life. That is all that matters."

AMEN.