

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 8, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ACTS 1:8

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be My witnesses...”

ARE YOU A “SEA OF GALILEE” CHRISTIAN?

If you examine a map of Palestine, you will observe that the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are supplied with water from the same source. Streams which rise high up among the foothills of Mount Hermon in Lebanon unite to form the River Jordan which flows into the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. However, the river emerges again at the southern end of the lake and flows south another 70 miles until it enters the Dead Sea. The water in the two lakes is very different, as you all know.

The Dead Sea, the level of which is 1,293 feet below sea level, is the lowest body of water on the surface of the earth. It has no outlet, and the water it receives has to be carried off by evaporation. In consequence, the waters of the lake are impregnated with mineral substances to a remarkable degree. They yield 25% of salt, whereas the ocean yields but 4% to 6%. Needless to say, life of any kind is impossible in this lake.

Bruce Barton, in a celebrated magazine article some years ago, gave the following fine paragraphs which I quote in full:

“There are two seas in Palestine. One is fresh, and fish are in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters. Along its shores the children play, as children played when Jesus was there. He loved it. He could look across its silver surface when He spoke His parables. And on a rolling plain, not far away, He fed 5,000 people.”

“The river Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. Men build their houses near to it, and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there.”

“The river Jordan flows on south into another sea. Here is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds, no children’s laughter. Travelers choose another route unless on urgent business. The air hangs heavy above its water, and neither man nor beast nor fowl will drink.”

“What makes this mighty difference in these neighbor seas? Not the river Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie, nor the country round about.”

“This is the difference. The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it, another drop flows out. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets it keeps.

The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives nothing. That is why it is dead.”

Then comes the punch line — “There are two seas in Palestine. There are two kinds of people in the world.”

The point I am trying to make this morning is this — to get the best out of anything we must share it with others, just as the Sea of Galilee receives, but passes on, the waters of the Jordan, and so keeps fresh and pure.

This is especially true with regard to our Christian experience. If you have had a vital, life-changing experience of the grace of God in Christ, you can do one of two things: You may try to keep it all to yourself, in which case you will surely lose it; or, you may pass it on, share it with others, in which case it will remain yours forever, and will grow richer every day you live.

I have known church members who have received the message of the Gospel and the blessings of Christ and the church for years, and yet who have no real desire or sense of compulsion to share that message and that discovery with others at all. Some of them even say, “Well, you know, my religious experience is such a personal and intimate thing that I cannot speak about it to others.”

Just imagine what would have happened if the early Christians had talked that kind of nonsense! Or what if Dr. Jonas Salk, when he discovered how to immunize your child and mine against polio, had locked the results of his research in a safety deposit box and refused to share them with the world!

We always committed our children to the Lord as they grew up, but there was one terrible anxiety I had, and that was that they might ever contract polio. I always remembered how many of my high school friends were stricken down in the terrible epidemic of 1937. We only had Valerie and Alan when Dr. Salk’s immunization became available, and I remember well asking our doctor about it, and he said, “I’m getting very small supplies of it because it’s just coming on the market, and it’s expensive, and I’ll have to charge you \$10 each to get them done.” (Those were big bucks in those days.) And I said, “Doctor, I don’t care if I have to pay \$100 each; I want them immunized.” And the joy it was to take them that day (I remember it as if it were yesterday) to get their shots against polio! But what if Dr. Salk had kept his secret to himself?

It is just as serious as that when you don’t share Jesus with others. Believe me, when church members talk as I have said some of them do, I don’t want to be judgmental, but I say to myself, “Has that person ever really been born again, and experienced the forgiveness of God in the Lord Jesus Christ?”

You see, if our Christian life is to be strong and meaningful and productive, then it must be characterized by two things: Intake and Outlet. Intake of spiritual power through the new birth, the in-filling of the Holy Spirit, private devotion, and public worship; and outlet of spiritual power through effective Christian service.

Now this truth is summarized in our text, the parting words of our resurrected Lord to His disciples before His ascension into heaven, when He said, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you (there is the intake), and you shall be My witnesses unto the ends of the earth” (there is the outlet). At this very moment the blessed Holy Spirit of God waits to take possession of each one of us, to fill us with the very power of Almighty God Himself, so that we may be equipped to witness by life and by lip, by precept and by example, to the saving power of Christ. You and I have been saved to serve. Conversion is not a dead—end street: It is the gateway to Christian service. So, I ask you — Are you a “Sea of Galilee” Christian or a “Dead Sea” church member? Let us think for a moment or two of how you and I can be effective witnesses for Christ, and thus enhance the world outreach of the Church. Let me mention a few things by way of “outlet.”

1. By our unconscious influence. This is not a complete means of testifying to Christ, but it is a beginning, and it can be very effective. Of one great Christian it was said, “His life spoke so loudly that I seldom heard his words.” I like that.

In Acts 5 we are told how the people in Jerusalem brought their sick friends out into the streets. Why? So that the very shadow of the Apostle Peter falling upon them as he walked past might heal them! Did you ever realize how your unconscious influence can have a tremendously healing power? All unknown to you, someone may be encouraged, drawn closer to Christ, and enabled to face life more courageously just because your shadow crossed his or her life!

I love that passage in John 12 where Mary anointed the feet of Jesus and then wiped them with her hair. Then we are told that “the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.” You see, when Mary anointed the Lord’s feet and then wiped them with her hair, she went about her chores in the house, from room to room, and as she went, the fragrance went with her!

Isn’t that how it should be with us? When we have been with Jesus, engaging every day in enriching, personal devotional fellowship with Him, then as we go about the home, the school, the office, wherever we are, we’re carrying the fragrance with us!

2. Then there is intercessory prayer — another effective means of witness. Our unconscious influence can reach only a limited number of people, but prayer can touch the world. Are we really using effectively this mighty weapon which is at our disposal? We need a breadth of vision. We need to raise our sights above even our own congregation and community, catch a glimpse of a whole world for which Christ died, and for which He yearns.

Over the years I have encountered church members (happily not in our congregation here) who secretly begrudge the benevolent portion of their givings which go to overseas missionary endeavor. They utter pretty clichés about “the heathen at our own door.” They never let people forget how much money is needed here at home. Yet this attitude would disappear overnight if they would only engage in intercessory prayer for the millions who live and die and never hear about Jesus because some Christians fail in their missionary responsibility. Surely the ideal church budget would be one in which we give a dollar for missions for every dollar we spend on the home front.

The first Christian missionary of modern times was William Carey, who, in 1793 went to India, and labored there with signal success for more than 40 years. As a young man Carey had been a shoemaker in a Northamptonshire Village in England. On one wall of his shop he had pinned up a map of the world; and it was his custom each day to think about one particular country and pray for the ultimate conversion of its people to Christ.

We must put passion into our praying. We must zero in on specific people and causes. We don't need a shotgun nearly so much as we need a rifle. We must focus right in on individuals and countries and specific causes. Purchase a small notebook and make it the autobiography of your prayer life. Have a prayer list; write down the names of individuals and causes for whom God continues to give you a concern. Be definite and specific in your praying. You will soon find that your book will include so many items that you will have to divide them into seven so that you can cover them all in a week. But it is so well worthwhile to engage in this spiritual discipline. You are really doing business with the Lord when you maintain this practice of intercessory prayer. Remember William Carey's famous words — "Attempt great things for God and expect great things from God."

3. By the intelligent and proportionate giving of our money because our money can go where we cannot go. I need hardly remind you that the work of the Lord is hampered at every turn by lack of financial support. In spite of any objections raised against it, I still believe in the scriptural practice of tithing, and my wife and I have practiced it through the years. I say this not in any boastful spirit, but simply to testify that as sinners saved by grace, tithing has been one of the greatest joys of our lives; and it's always possible if you really want to engage in it. God never asks us to do the impossible, and tithing is certainly a biblical principle.

When I was in Detroit recently, we were shown the average giving record of all the major Protestant denominations in this country. You will be pleased to learn that the Evangelical Presbyterian Church ranks sixth in a list of over fifty. But our congregation here gives more than three times as much as the average for the EPC, a truly magnificent achievement. It certainly makes me feel good after having preached tithing here in Alexandria for the past 24 years!

If the Lord's tenth is systematically laid aside as each paycheck comes to hand; if it is regarded as something "sacred" in the truest sense of the term, then there will never be any insuperable problem. I remember Billy Graham saying many years ago that the Christian who tithes can do far more with the nine-tenths that are left than the unbeliever can do with the ten-tenths that he keeps for himself.

4. Then finally we can witness by engaging in some definite piece of service for Christ. At any given time, each believer should be pursuing some particular task for Christ and His Kingdom. Don't ever say there is nothing you can do. You know that every Christian has been given at least one spiritual gift that can and should be employed in the service of the Lord.

Many of you have taken our Spiritual Gifts Seminar and know what your gift or gifts are. We plan to have another seminar, God willing, on a Saturday in July for those of you who want to discover what God has given you. Also, we want you all to fill out and submit to us your Time

and Talent sheet. All the information gleaned from the seminars and from the Time and Talent sheets is filed in the church office, so that when specific ministries need to be accomplished in the congregation, we can call upon those with the required gifts to undertake those tasks.

There is a ministry for you to perform as a member of the Body of Christ. If you do not believe this, then let me tell you about one Christian lady in Australia. When she was eighteen years of age, she developed a dreadful malady which necessitated the amputation of one of her feet. As the disease persisted, both legs were amputated at the trunk. Then it broke out in her hands, and ultimately both arms had to be sacrificed leaving only the torso. For more than fifteen years she lay in this condition, in a bedroom, the walls of which were covered with texts of Scripture, all of them speaking of joy and peace in Christ. Now, she might well have said as a Christian, "There is nothing left for me to do for my Lord and Savior." But she had the gift of evangelism, and do you know what she did? She dictated letters which were sent to hundreds of people all over the world whom God had laid upon her heart, and before she went home to God she had received more than 1,500 letters from people who had come to a saving knowledge of Christ as a result of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of those to whom she had written. And when someone said to her — "How do you do it?" — she smiled and gave this answer, "Well, you know, Jesus said that those who believed on Him, out of them would flow rivers of living water. I just believed on Jesus, and that is all!" And "when the roll is called up yonder," there will be at least 1,500 people standing beside her who will say to the Lord, "Praise God for this dear sister, for without her faithful witness I would never have known You, and I would never have experienced Your great salvation!"

Oh, my friends, get into this soul-saving business. Get into this ministry of letting your life tell for Jesus. We live in a world today that is crumbling under our very feet. The need is appalling, the time may be short, and the opportunity for bringing Christ to the nations is unprecedented. He gave His all for us. Let us dedicate our all to Him, that by the witness of our unconscious influence, by our intercessory prayers, by the worthy offering of our money, and by our faithful service, we may prove ourselves to be "Sea of Galilee" Christians, not "Dead Sea" church members.

May God bless you as you make your commitment or re-commitment to Christ right now.

AMEN.