

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 31, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:2

“Now is the acceptable time.”

GOD’S WORD FOR DECEMBER THIRTY-FIRST

All our lives we are the slaves of time. Time has dogged us like a demon since our earliest years. Cast your mind back to childhood and recall how you were haunted by time! What were the most hateful statements we ever heard as children, and heard every day? “It’s *time* to go to bed”; and then, “It’s *time* to get up.” I never could quite make up my mind as to which was the more provoking remark! I know I never wanted to get into bed, and I never wanted to get out of it!

I read once about a psychologist who said that anyone could have a will of steel if, every day of his life, he would do just two things he didn’t want to do. Well, of course, that is nonsense. All my life I have been going to bed and getting up, but I wouldn’t say I have a will of steel!

Nor does this enslavement to time end in childhood. Our bondage becomes even more stringent with the passing years. When the shrill note fades from our ears — “time for school,” “time for homework,” “time for music practice” — it is only replaced by another form of time slavery — “time for *work*” — a more insistent clock, longer hours, the minutes so important now that many people are even compelled to “clock in.” How many of you have ever had to punch a time clock? I started when I was fourteen, and well do I remember its smug, conceited, leering face! That clock never had what the Bible calls “bowels of mercy.” It didn’t care if I was late getting out of school, or the streetcar slow. “You are late, ten minutes *late*, and I’m going to tell on you.” And as my card went in, the bell went “ting,” and I had lost a quarter of an hour’s pay.

Of course, most of you aristocrats know nothing about that! You enjoy your protracted coffee breaks and your friendly visiting from office to office, but even you know something about the imprisonment of time — racing from engagement to engagement, fitting this in with that, giving five minutes to this phone call and fifteen minutes to that emergency.

Time, time, time; it haunts us all.

Isn’t it strange, after all, to remember that time has no real existence; that it is only a category of human thought; that there are no calendars, for instance, in heaven; that eternity is not time drawn out, but timelessness. As the old Gospel hymn puts it:

“When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound
And *time* shall be no more...”

We are obliged to think of time because we have an awareness of one thing succeeding

another, and so to tidy up this experience of successiveness, we think in the category of time.

And it is ironic to remember that a false handling of time tricks many of us, for more than half a lifetime, into wishing life away. You remember, when you were children, how time dragged. We were always wishing the days away to the Christmas holidays or summer vacation. We were always wanting to grow up. If, when we were ten, someone guessed us to be twelve, we were pleased as could be! We would refer to some unfortunate child six months younger than ourselves as “that *kid*.”

Many young people wish life away in their teens. They wish they were finished with high school or college so that they could get a good job or get married. So many people haven't the patience to say, “Let us enjoy what we have now.”

And finally, they get married, and children come, and soon they start wishing for the time when the children will go to school. And if things are a bit difficult economically, they start wishing for the children to be out at work and supporting themselves. And by this time, father is getting middle-aged and gray and bald, and very soon he is looking forward to the time when he will retire!

The folly of it! Do learn, when you are young, to live each day as it comes, and to live it to the full as *God* would have you do. Many, many people are old before they learn that great and precious lesson of life.

I believe that God gives a unique significance to *every* period of life. And I believe that every genuine Christian, endowed by God with true wisdom, learns how to gain maximum fulfillment from each succeeding segment of life. If you ask such a person, “What is the most meaningful period of life?” he or she will always say, “Now, *Now!*” And they are not foolish; they are wise.

There are some senses in which God's time is always “now”: “Today, if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts” (Psalm 95:8). “Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

Let me, on this last day of the year, try, with God's help, to impress upon your minds three simple truths about “time.”

1. The PAST is not dead. People usually think that time past is dead. But yesterday is not dead; it is alive, making today and shaping tomorrow. Don't you see? The past which you have lived is still living. It is not really behind you; it is within you, part and parcel of your personality, a constituent element in your character today.

The poet says,

“Our deeds still travel with us from afar,
And what we have been makes us what we are.”

When Solomon built the magnificent temple in Jerusalem to the glory of God, he had all the stones pre-cut in the quarries and all the timbers hewed and prepared in the forests, so that we read in 1 Kings 6:7, “When the temple was built, it was with stone prepared at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple when it was being built.” Silently it went up, stone upon stone, timber upon timber. Do realize that every day you live, a building block is being silently added to the edifice of your life, so that what you are today is the result of all your yesterdays.

Look at this poor alcoholic. He is not drunk now, but he will be tonight. For ten years and more, liquor has relentlessly been gaining the mastery over him, and he doesn't even know it! If you were to suggest to him that he is an alcoholic, he would be both insulted and appalled that you would presume to reach such an erroneous opinion. But he can't stay away from the bottle. For years he has been like this. Would you say that those ten past years were dead? Would to God they were! But they are alive; they are within him. It is those ten years that have made him what he is.

Let me say this too. One of the tragedies of premarital sex is that it very often creates a pattern of behavior where a fellow or a girl can't be satisfied with one partner. So, promiscuity and fornication before marriage is followed by adultery after marriage, and often the breakup of the home and family because marriage doesn't transform a hog into a gazelle.

You read in the most recent church newsletter of the home-call of Mrs. Chloe Baker. She was the mother of Mrs. John Muench who, along with her husband, was a devoted member of Faith Church until their removal to North Carolina some years ago. Mrs. Baker was 93 when the Lord called her home. I had the privilege of visiting with her six years ago when she was in the home of her daughter and son-in-law. I wish you could have seen her face! How beautiful it was! In it you could see distilled goodness. And when the old lady smiled it was like a light being turned on in a dark room! How did she get such a face? Ah, from her yesterdays. She became a Christian at age 20, and when I met her she had been a Christian for 67 years. Her yesterdays were alive in her character, and her character was mirrored in her face. She was an exuberant believer, always zealous in introducing others to Jesus. How did she become the person she was? Here was the essence of thousands of hours of secret prayer and of a heart ever open to the God of purity and holy love. All her yesterdays were there, alive and gloriously winsome!

My friend, live for God today; for tomorrow, today will be your yesterday! Yesterday is not dead. This is the first mistake we must correct. Time past is not dead time.

2. The FUTURE is not ours. People are fond of saying, especially to young people, “You hold your future in your *own* hands!” But can you be sure of that? There are few mistakes more common and more tragic than to count on the future. Cecil Rhodes, the famous English empire builder of the 19th century who in his will provided the funds for the scholarships which bear his name, planned big things, big things for his own future and big things for Africa also. But he died at the age of 49, and his last words were these: “So little done; so much to do!”

Keats died at 25, Schubert at 31, Mozart at 35, Dylan Thomas at 39. Friends had prophesied a great future for each of them, but none of them reached middle age.

No one can count with absolute confidence on tomorrow. When you take a job, you accept certain conditions of contract — a month's notice either way, or a week's. But there is no such contract when you accept life. A moment's notice is all you may receive.

A few years ago, in the ballroom of a London hotel, at the annual dinner of an association opposed to religion, their chairman was making an after-dinner speech. He was lampooning religion and guffawing at the vision the Apostle Paul saw on the Damascus road. Suddenly (all the papers reported it the next morning), in the middle of a blasphemous sentence, he went deathly pale and slumped down dead. "A massive coronary thrombosis," said the coroner. The notice can be as short as that.

Mickey Mantle and Billy Martin were bosom buddies as they played baseball for the New York Yankees. On the road they roomed together and, according to all reports, they were a pretty wild pair. Mantle died a few months ago after a long and painful illness. But, thank God, another old teammate, Bobby Richardson, led Mickey to Christ in the last weeks of his life and preached at his funeral.

What about Billy Martin? On Christmas morning a few years ago, suffering from a hangover, he got behind the wheel of his pick-up truck, careened down a hill, smashed into a tree, and in an instant was ushered into eternity. He was given no last-minute opportunity to prepare for his end.

The future is *not* ours.

3. **"NOW" is the acceptable time.** Indeed, the only time we have is "now." It is literally true to say that "now is the acceptable time," in the sense that it is the only time you can possibly accept. It is in the very nature of time to come to you moment by moment.

Someone tried once to scare Will Rogers by asking him, "If you knew you had only 48 hours to live, how would you spend them?" And Rogers replied, "One at a time." Poor Will got no time to prepare for his end either, dying in a plane crash.

You can accept time only as it comes, an hour at a time, a moment at a time. Therefore, in that sense, now *is* the acceptable time. It is the *present* moment that you have. How are you spending time now? Just imagine what could happen for good in your life in the closing moments of this service! Listen:

(a) God's forgiveness is offered NOW! Isn't that a wonderful announcement to make? Years of sin — forgiven in a moment! Is it possible? Is that a credible statement? Does that make sense in a moral universe? I do not know whether that makes sense in your idea of a moral universe, but I will tell you this — that is the Gospel! God's forgiveness is available NOW. For the sake of our Lord's atoning sacrifice upon the Cross, God meets penitence with pardon, and He meets it now.

Someone has written the parable of the Prodigal Son as Jesus *didn't* tell it:

And he arose and set out for his home, and when at last he arrived at the door, he banged, and there was no response. He stood there in his piteous rags and hunger for a while, and then he knocked again, and a third time; and finally, a window opened and his father looked out and said, "Oh, it's you. They've really given you the business, haven't they? You look a real dandy. What have you come home for? You've had your share of everything. You know where to come when you're hungry..."

And he said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight..." But his father banged the window down and left him for a while on the doorstep. Presently his father opened the door and said, "You're an utter disgrace to me and to all your relatives. I'm ashamed of you, utterly *ashamed*. But I'm your father, and I've thought it out, and I am prepared to put you on probation for three months; and if, at the end of three months, I can find no fault in you, then, perhaps, I'll consider giving you another start..."

That is the parable as Jesus *didn't* tell it. And even as you listened to the words your heart cried out, "Lies! Lies!" And you are right.

"And while he was yet a long way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." No probationary period, you notice; no talk of "three months." No. It was instant acceptance. It was now, *NOW!* "The robe," he cries, "bring the robe, the ring, the shoes. Kill the fatted calf!"

"Now is the acceptable time." "Today, if you will hear My voice..." The trouble is that when God says "Today," we so often say "Tomorrow." "Yes, tomorrow; for *certain*, tomorrow. Tomorrow I will begin the new life with Jesus. Tomorrow I will walk with God." And when the morrow comes, you are still saying, "Tomorrow." And so, the years pass. Will death come and still find you saying, "Tomorrow"? "Today if you will hear His voice, harden not your heart." Jesus will not force open the door. You must open it from the inside.

(b) And then, there is another precious truth. Jesus wants you to make Him Lord of your life NOW! The great majority of you are sincerely trusting Christ as your Savior from the guilt of sin. You know you are forgiven for Christ's sake, and that God has accepted you because of the imputed righteousness of Christ.

But there are those in this church who are not growing in grace as they should. They are not living a disciplined, obedient Christian life. There are things in their lives that are displeasing to the Lord and contrary to His will. There are those of you who don't know what it means to make Christ Lord and Master of every department of your life. There is a holding back, a holding out against complete surrender to Him. And while you are in that condition, saved but not fully surrendered, you cannot know peace, joy, victory, or fulfillment in *any* area of your life, simply because a civil war is raging within you.

Christ doesn't want simply to save you; He wants to possess you, and He wants to

possess you NOW! What a wonderful way to enter 1996 — completely sold out to Jesus Christ!

What are the things in your life that are displeasing to God? What are the things that keep you from making Christ your Lord and Master? Deal with those things and surrender them to Him NOW.

Elisabeth Elliot tells of watching a Welsh shepherd, John Jones by name, with his champion sheep dog, Mac, herding one hundred rams into a pen where they were to be dipped in a disinfectant solution. Mac was in his glory. He came of a long line of working dogs, and he had sheep in his blood. That was what he was made for. This was what he had been trained to do, and she says it was a marvelous thing to see him circling to the right, circling to the left, barking, crouching, racing along, herding a stray sheep here, nipping at a stubborn one there, his eyes always glued to the sheep, his ears listening for the whistled commands of his master. And as they watched, Elisabeth Elliot asked the shepherd's wife, "Do the sheep have any idea what's happening?" "Not a clue," she said. "And what about the dog?" And back came the answer, "Mac doesn't understand the pattern; he only understands *obedience*."

There was a sheep dog whose trust in that man was absolute, whose obedience was instantaneous and unconditional, and whose meat and drink was to do the will of his master. Is it like that between you and Christ? "I delight to do Your will, Oh my God; Your law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8).

Today, if you will hear His voice..." (Psalm 95:8).

What a glad farewell to the old year! What a joyous fearlessness concerning all that the future may have in store—if we will only receive by faith Christ's offer of forgiveness and make Him Lord of our lives *NOW!*

NOW! "Today if you will hear My voice, harden not your heart."

AMEN.