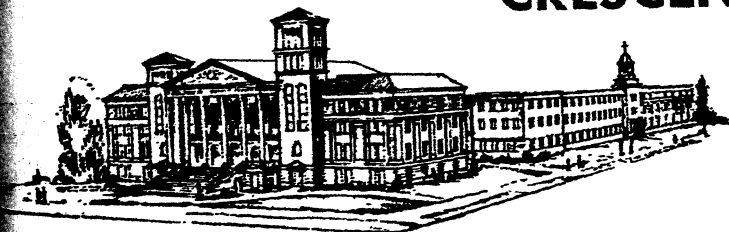


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"HOMEWORK FOR REVIVAL"



Sunday Morning, March 11, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Mark 2:13-17; Luke 14:12-14

In many respects Jesus of Nazareth was a typical Jewish rabbi. He worshiped in the synagogue; He quoted from the Old Testament; and most of what He taught can be found in earlier Rabbinic sources. This raises a question that has been heatedly debated for nineteen hundred years: just what, if any, was His uniqueness? In what way does the religion of Jesus differ from the religion of Judaism? Was the early church justified in thinking of herself as a new reality, or was she really just an adaptation of the old covenant? Of course, there are more implications here than could be dealt with in one sermon; what I want to do this morning is to single out one distinctive and show its relevance for the church or today.

That distinctive to which I have reference is Jesus' relationship to sinful people. From a reading of the Gospel records, it is quite obvious that this was the occasion of a fundamental clash with Judaism. The difference here was more a matter of method than of concern. The Jews honestly cared for "the people of the land," and they established elaborate rituals by which a sinner could be purified. Anytime one would present himself in repentance, they were willing to deal with him. But Jesus did not wait for the sinner to come on his own; He went out, and by His action tried to set in motion the process of repentance. Here, then, was the basic difference: with the Jews, the initiative was taken by the sinner and the movement was toward the religious community; with Jesus, the initiative was His and He moved toward the sinner. To put it in its simplest form: the Jews waited; Jesus went. One approach is that of "the sought"; the other is that of "the Seeker." The standing rabbi and the searching Shepherd - this sets the difference in bold relief.

Now do not for one minute underestimate the significance of this distinctive. It gives shape to every facet of religious life. What I think about God, how I relate to my fellowman - all of this is determined by the basic motif. And this latter approach must be formative for any group that claims kinship with Christ. The name "Christian" has no meaning, unless this distinctive principle is operative in all we do.

This poses as good a test for the modern church as anything I know. Just what is our attitude toward outsiders? Here is the telling inquiry: do we reflect the spirit that was uniquely our Lord's? He took the initiative...made the first move...came to seek and to save. What about us who follow in His path?

The history of the church is pathetic reading at this point. How often Jesus must have looked down and repeated His question: "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I command you?" (Luke 6:46). At some points the Body of Christ has not even lived up to the level of the synagogue; that is, she has rejected those who come on their own initiative. By letting human barriers rise up

Sunday Morning, March 11, 1962

where He has "broken down the middle wall of partition" (Ephesians 2:14), the church has denied not only the outgoing nature of Christ's love but also its universal scope. Examples of this are almost too numerous - and embarrassing - to relate.

Many years ago a bright young Indian who was studying in England decided to attend a Christian church. Although raised a devout Hindu, he was quite interested in Christianity. But when he entered the door, his path was blocked, and he was told that only white people were allowed in there. The young Indian's name was Chandi; he later had extraordinary influence, but as you can imagine, he never became a Christian.

One day a woman of questionable character appeared at a church service, and liked it so much she began to attend regularly. Finally the minister had to ask her to quit coming, explaining: "Many of our members object to your being seen here." There was a long pause, and then with tears welling up in her eyes she said: "I know I ain't what I ought to be. But sir, ain't there any place a sinner can go?" At times, instead of being seeking love, the church has not been love at all. Christ must wonder why we bother to use His name when we are so unlike Him.

But it is not enough to abstain from rejection. Passive acceptance and toleration fall far short of distinctive Christianity. This is my haunting fear about our church. Our doors are open, but that is about all. We operate too much on a "take-it-or-leave-it" basis. I am ashamed to admit it, but I suspect that most of those who come to us make the first step. We respond to their desire rather than their responding to us. Until we can get on the offensive, and are actually alert to the needs of the community, we may grow and become more impressive, but we shall not be uniquely Christian. The church is most herself when the concerns of others become our concern; when we can speak before being spoken to; when we can say honestly to our community: "What happens to you makes a difference to us."

Dr. Roy McClain tells of a young man who sat down by a lady on a train and began talking to her quite naturally about the Christian life. When they got to their destination, they said goodbye on the train platform. The woman's husband asked who it was, and the wife replied: "Just the man who sat beside me on the train." As they walked along, she said: "You know, he asked me the strangest thing. He asked me if I was a Christian." The husband replied indignantly: "I hope you told him to mind his own business." She answered: "That's just it; to hear him talk, you would think it was his business." Quite frankly, this is our business - the legitimate concern of the church of Jesus Christ. Taking the initiative "to seek and to save that which is lost" is the essence of Christianity.

With this principle of seeking love clearly in mind, the church must ask how such a mission can be accomplished. And right here we encounter a condition that is becoming increasingly obvious today; namely, the lost will not attend our church services. For some reason the institutional church has lost much of her attracting power. The building itself seems to be a barrier, and the number is increasing who cannot be lured into the program as it is now structured. Invite them all you will, they have developed a mental - or spiritual - block. More and more these days I hear revivals described this way: "Good preaching, good singing, good crowds - but no decisions." Then the person will add: "There simply were not any lost people there." In one of my earlier pastorates I recall there was a man who had never attended church much in all his life. Through a bereavement experience I was able to get close to him, and he began to come to church. He seemed enthralled by it all,

it being a brand new experience for him. After the fourth Sunday, he came up to me and made an interesting observation: "That was a wonderful sermon, but the people who needed to hear it most were not here." A relative newcomer had sensed the great weakness of the modern church: we are out of touch with those who need the Gospel most. And from the way the future looks, they will not come to regular church services.

What must we do? Shall we continue to invite them and give up hope when they refuse to attend our institution? No! A church of seeking love will reckon with the situation and devise a strategy. If they will not come to us, then we must go to them. If the regular church services are impotent, then we must shift the frontier. And this morning I have a definite proposal to make - let your home become the frontier of seeking love.

Now this is certainly not an original idea of mine. It goes back to the New Testament, and to the earliest stages of Jesus' ministry. One day, while in Capernaum, Jesus passed by the seat of customs and issued a startling invitation. To Levi, the most despised man in town, Jesus said: "Follow me." And Levi did; we are told "he arose and followed Him" (Mark 2:14). Then note what happened next. Levi wanted to share this experience with others of his outcast friends, but he did not invite them to the synagogue to hear Jesus preach. He knew they would not be accepted or that they could never be persuaded to do it. So, Levi invited them to his house for dinner, and this became "the frontier" for Christ. In this atmosphere the usual defenses were down, and seeking love could make contact as nowhere else.

I am impressed with the possibilities of this technique for today. I believe there are people who could be reached this way who are completely immune to the traditional approaches. They react against the stereotype "soul-winner" who has only a limited interest in them and wants to superimpose his opinion on them. I do not mean to disparage the personal worker who diligently goes out "in the highways and hedges." But many times it has been done in a negative spirit. I have known people who go out in a judgmental and condescending way; they are quick to say to the prospect: "You are a sinner, lost, damned." They often appear to be self-righteous, as if they have a right to "set another straight." Because there is little love or warmth here, more often than not it fails.

Set over against this the positive approach of Levi. Let us say, for example, you invite to dinner some person or couple who are not meaningfully related to Christ. You might invite someone else who is an articulate and concerned Christian. The whole atmosphere should be positive. Your concern is not to embarrass a person or be overbearing, but rather simply to share with them what you can. In the companionship that is created by eating together, a personal witness can flow quite naturally. You are not trying to win a debate or compel belief; you plainly tell what Christ and the church have meant in your life. Think of yourself, not as a prosecutor or a judge, but as a witness - one who speaks out of his own experience for the benefit of all concerned. Now this will not always succeed; but the possibility of making initial contact in this way is far greater than usual.

In Luke 14:12-14 Jesus suggests that sometime we entertain "for the Gospel's sake." And this morning I challenge you to dedicate your dinner table to the Lord. I cannot even imagine what would happen if the one thousand homes in our church became "frontiers of seeking love." It would not only bring new people to Christ; it would also deepen and enrich our own understanding. The best way to learn is to

teach; the quickest way to grow spiritually is "to give yourself away." Renewal as we have never experienced it would come into our church if we dared to make this venture.

I am utterly seriously in this challenge, and I have a specific deadline in mind. Between now and April the fifteenth, will you bring someone into your home and let them experience Christian fellowship and witness? This is literally "the homework" I am assigning. The battlefield of today is not here in the church building. This is "the training center," "the supply depot," the place where you come to get refreshed and inspired; but the battle line is out there - where you live.

Not long ago I read about the missionary method of the Church of South India. In most of the villages there is no church building, so when a missionary comes to town, he goes to the home of a Christian. Then all the other Christians go out and bring their neighbors to this home. The preacher stands in the door, the Christians sit at his feet, and the non-Christians stand about in a circle. And when the Gospel of Seeking Love is proclaimed, those on the outside already have experienced it, for someone has sought them out. And they can believe, because they have seen this Love incarnate in Christians.

This is the only power the church ever has - when the Gospel finds expression through men. Just as our redemption was wrought when "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), so now we must let this Seeking Love find habitation in us. I am asking you personally to accept this challenge. Let your home...your table...your witness be "the frontier of seeking love."

This is literally your "homework."