

Annual Convention Sermon

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FOR GOD'S SAKE

BY DOTSON M. NELSON, JR.

It occurs to me that the anatomy of a sermon might be interesting to a congregation of about eighty percent preacher or preacher-related people. So here goes.

First of all, I was greatly flattered, pleased and proud of being asked to deliver this message; that is until three months ago when the heavy weight of responsibility fell upon me with all the indirection of a ton of bricks.

Second, I had to make up my mind whether to preach to make a show or to be helpful. I chose the latter.

Third, since most of those to whom I would be preaching were my brethren whom I love, it seemed wise to choose a subject and text which would speak to my own needs since I, like you am called to be a minister.

This then is the background of the text Matthew 6:1-18 and the subject "For God's Sake."

Studdert-Kennedy, the inimitable "Woodbine Willie" chaplain of World War I, once described the judgment scene by complaining that the judgment was not so involved as people make it. He claimed that the scene was relatively simple. God would simply ask each of us, "Well, what did you make of it?" meaning the life you were given. Let me be impertinent enough to disagree with his question but not his view of the simplicity of the judgment. God always asks *why*, seldom *what*. *What* smacks of legalism; *why* has to do with the heart, the attitude, the motive.

This was the crux of the life and teaching of Jesus and indeed of the whole New Testament. It is just here that I have my deepest problem, my hardest time with myself. I can come much closer to doing the right or accepted thing than I can come to having the right motive for doing it.

When Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 5:20, "Except your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven," he gave us a key to the understanding of the Christian life. Now the Pharisees were by no means "bad" men in the accepted sense of the word then and now. They were moral men—judged by their external actions. They did the "right" things for the wrong reasons. It is against this group, who would be respected citizens today too, that Jesus delivered his most scathing rebukes.

This was also what Paul had in mind in Ephesians 4:15 when he admonished the Christians of the province of Asia to "speak the truth in love." Not to speak truth shows not only a lack of integrity but a lack of intelligence as well. But to speak the truth without love shows a lack of warmth, of concern, of compassion.

Doctor Hersey Davis, my seminary professor of New Testament Greek to whom I owe more than I can ever repay, tried to

teach this lesson to me long ago with the most trenchant development of the Sermon on the Mount I have ever known. I walked with him up the ladder of the beatitudes. I saw influence as both salt and light. I became acquainted with the conduct of the Christian going beyond existing law. But somehow I never really got Matthew 6:1-18 until years later. He said then that this was the motive of the Christian disciple, "for the Father's sake," but it did not get through my thick skull.

There is a book in a bookcase by my desk at home entitled "For God's Sake, Be Human." Frankly I do not have much trouble with that. But I do have a good deal of trouble with "for God's sake, be Christian."

Did you ever think of doing something simply for the sake of God? I have heard the expression, "For God's sake, do something!" many, many times. I have often regarded that as a form of profanity. It need not be if you really mean it. It may be instead an attempt to reach a deeper level of living. This idea of living life "for God's sake" is, I confess, mind-boggling for me. It makes me wonder if I have ever had so pure, so awe-inspiring a motive. Yet I suppose this is almost what is meant by the statement "doing the will of God" except it gets beyond the *what* to the *why*, beyond the act to the motive.

Jesus gives us three illustrations concerning the life of the Christian disciple which cover our relationships with others, with God, and with our own selves. The illustrations have to do with almsgiving, with prayer, and with fasting. The applications are limitless.

Take, for instance, our relationship to God. Jesus used the illustration of prayer as a religious duty, and so it is. But all prayer is not purposeful. Some is to be seen of men. That's all that happens, says Jesus, men see you praying. Even prayer is for God's sake. I know I prayed "for Jesus' sake" hundreds of times before I knew that this was the essence of the motive of prayer.

A friend of mine told me of an experience in his early ministry when he went to supply a small church. He was met at the train station by a man who was obviously the "bellwether" of the little congregation. He told my friend what the usual order of service was, concluding with the statement, "Usually the preacher calls on someone to pray; and, if I do say so myself, I'm powerful in prayer."

Before we point our finger at someone else, however, let us remember that three fingers are pointing in our direction. You see, most of us spend our lives in religious duties. The relentless march of Sunday sermons, Bible studies, visiting, counseling, administering, make one so obsessed with the job at hand that we have little time to think about the *why* of it all. I catch myself talking about *my* church, not God's church; about what I'm doing, not what God is doing. It's pretty easy to preach a sermon to be seen and heard of men. The figures in the associational minutes mean a great deal to us while we are trying to build up *us*. I'm as guilty as anyone, but I know deep down that if I am to fulfill my calling what I do must be done not for glory but for God's sake.

Sometimes it is very hard to find, but each of us has a spiritual side. It was a source of real concern to the apostle Paul that, although he handled the word of truth, he might himself be a castaway. It is true that "if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself to the battle?" (1 Cor. 14:8) But in our warfare the *trumpeter* is important, too. The call of the life blends with the call of the message to give it validity.

Do we pray for God's sake? Do we preach for God's sake? Do we witness for God's sake? Do we make reports for God's sake? Do we write our "since I came" columns for God's sake? Do we love our neighbor, especially our nearest competition, for God's sake? On and on we can go. It is a sobering thought.

The danger crops up even in prayer. Doctor W. O. Carver is quoted by Doctor Davis as saying, "There is no danger more subtle than to win a reputation for fluency, eloquence, and power in prayer."

We must conclude in the modern day that fasting is typical of any abstinence from whatever may hinder spiritual growth. Someone has said there are more synthetic martyrs among us than ever before. This is in spite of the fact that if we are to become martyrs God needs no help from us. Doctor John A. Broadus was

wont to tell his students at the Seminary, "Don't let anyone know you are a preacher when they see you; but don't let them be surprised when they find out." Good advice that!

And about that giving record! Isn't it easy to make comparisons, particularly if the graph is on the upward climb? Giving records are easy to talk about in these inflationary days, but where is our conversation about increased Sunday School attendance? Jesus said, "Be not like the Pharisees who sound a trumpet before them" (Matt. 6:2). The old Greeks called that "playing our own flutes." In our own vernacular it is "blowing our own horns."

Look now at some of the characteristics of life *for God's sake*! There are four clearly defined in our scripture.

First, this kind of life must be *without ostentation*. The flamboyant person who seeks to call attention to himself rather than the God he serves gets what he seeks. He is seen of men, but he cannot please God at one and the same time. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men (not on yourself but from yourself), that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). But which one of us has not "played to the gallery" to win a point?

Lloyd Douglas' best book, *Magnificent Obsession*, is a treatment of the secret of Doctor Hudson found finally by Bobby Merrick. The secret was to keep his good deeds secret. It came from our passage. Douglas has Doctor Hudson say to one who sought to repay him, "You can't repay me; I've used it all up!"

The second characteristic of this kind of life is that it is life without playacting, without hypocrisy. Not one of us is without his masque, playing at least to some extent our parts, posturing upon the stage of life. The Greek word for playactor was *uper-critos*, which we have merely transliterated into our language as "hypocrite." Shakespeare said:

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players.

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts.

Jesus on the contrary taught that life is not a stage and we must be ourselves. Shakespeare enunciates our failure; Jesus points to the ideal.

Life, particularly for the committed Christian, is to be *without purely personal ambition*. Ambition may not be wrong in itself, but it can get out of hand easily. It is in point to hear apostle Paul (translated by Phillips in Phil. 3:7), who in looking at life before and after his Christian experience said, "How changed are my ambitions!" What he meant was that his personal air castles had melted away and been replaced by the structure of God's purpose and plan.

Life for God's sake must be lived *without sought publicity*. Deeds, prayers, met needs are to be a part of life because they are right before God—not so that men shall praise us. The reward we receive is from God, who sees even the most secret act, who knows our innermost thought, who will reward us in his infinite wisdom from his inexhaustible supply.

There are four principles which may well be helpful to us who aspire to live our lives for God's sake. These, too, come out of this passage from the Sermon on the Mount.

The first is the principle of *voluntariness*. This principle runs through all of the committed Christian life. No one can even come close to being a Christian unless he wants to be. "If any

man wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). An intense personal desire precedes any valid Christian experience. "Will you be enlisted as a volunteer?" is a part of the living as well as the beginning of the committed life.

There is also the principle of *aloneness*. Basically every decision in the Christian life is a lonely one. Maybe this was what Paul was getting at in Roman 1:17 when he spoke of "faith from beginning to end." Really in any Christian decision there is only the person and his God. It was no accident that Moses went to Midian, Paul to Arabia, and even Jesus to the wilderness. Whether you or I go geographically apart or not, we have to drop a curtain between ourselves and this wild, ravenous, speeding, mad world we live in. The opening must first be only to God. In the valley of deviation we can look no way but up.

A third principle is *positiveness*. Our whole faith is active, not passive. The Christian acts rather than waiting to be acted upon. In each of the three duties—almsgiving, praying, and fasting—action is posited. We may refrain from doing wrong all our lives and add up to a big fat zero. Righteousness in itself is an activity, never a state. We may well say, "Do something for God's sake," particularly if we leave out the comma.

A fourth principle is *self-judgment* rather than the judgment of others. This is a real area of difficulty for me. Of course, no one can keep from judging; but Jesus cautioned his disciples to use the same standard or a harsher one on themselves than they used on others. Instead of being harsh with myself and lenient with others, I find myself rationalizing my mistakes and castigating the mistakes of others. This certainly is not for God's sake. Rather it is for my own satisfaction. It sets me up. There is always someone we can be better than. The difficulty is that we are to compare ourselves with Christ, not with others.

This, then, is the heart of the Christian motive—for *God's sake*—calling attention to God rather than ourselves. Paul puts it this way: "Whatsoever ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

There is a scene in a few verses from the first chapter of John that seems to point out to me the great ambition of the committed Christian. The place is by the Jordan. John the Baptist has baptized Jesus previously. He was at the pinnacle of his success. He had many disciples. Two were with him. Andrew was one of them. John saw Jesus. Speaking to the two disciples, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:36). Now comes the great verse, John 1:37, "And the two disciples heard John speak, and they followed Jesus." What joy! What satisfaction! What peace! to know that men may hear us speak, see us live, and forget all about us, because they are so intent on following Jesus.

For me 'twas not the truth you taught
To you so clear, to me so dim;
But when you came to me, you brought
A sense of Him.

And from your eyes He beckons me
And from your heart His love is shed,
Till I lose sight of you and see
The Christ instead.

(Author unknown)