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Thank you
for being my friend
and a constant source
of inspiration across the
years.

His & yours,
Ed Young

SIDE STREETS

Acts 6:1-7; II Timothy 3:5

In Acts, Chapter One, we are told of the ascension of Jesus. I have never experienced anything to compare with this historical event.

In Acts, Chapter Two, we find the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit with all the supernatural signs, and we see the birth of the church. Three thousand individuals are born again and are baptized. In my personal experience, I have never encountered such supernatural, Spirit-filled occasions.

In Acts, Chapter Three, we have the healing of the man who had been lame since birth. It was a dramatic occasion. God has never used me in such a public way to bring about divine healing.

In Acts, Chapter Four, we see Peter and John thrown into prison because of this healing miracle and because they proclaimed the resurrection. I confess to you that I have never been incarcerated for preaching the gospel.

In Acts, Chapter Five, we read of the sin and death of Ananias and Sapphira. Miracle after miracle follow this incident. Some were healed by merely passing under the shadow of Peter. I have neither experienced nor viewed anything like these happenings in my life.

But when I come to Acts, Chapter Six, and I read that phrase, "There arose a murmuring," I begin to feel right at home!

We are told on four occasions by Dr. Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, that the church was in one accord and in one spirit: there was magnificent unity. It disturbs me that so rapidly on the heels of Pentecost, "There arose a murmuring." Yet, I am glad that the Holy Spirit let this be recorded. It helps me to know that the first church, that Pentecostal church, was not a perfect church. They had problems in that church.

A fellow goes to a new pastorate. After six months or a year, he begins to call around. "Look," he says, "recommend me somewhere else. This church is divided. The deacons are bickering. And I am surrounded by hundreds of people who could care less about the Lord."

You know, maybe I am naive; but I am under the impression that we should have the best minds and the best men introducing Jesus Christ in problem, tough places. That is just what I believe.

I met a friend on the street. He said, "I'm tired of problems, problems, problems!"

To which I replied, "Partner, I can tell you where you can go and find a fellowship of over 5,000 people and not one of them has a single problem!"

"Where is that? Tell me!" he eagerly responded.

"Forest Park Cemetery!"

In a human, secular, worldly sense, if the dead have no problems, then it seems to me that the more problems we have, the more alive we are! So I would say to you this morning that if you do not have a half dozen or so good, over-whelming problems, you had better get up right now, go to your hotel room, get down on your knees, and say, "O Lord, don't you trust me anymore? Give me some problems so that I can bring your Word to bear."

I am encouraged by the fact that the early church was not a perfect church: they had murmurings in their midst. Also, through these encounters, I can observe how they dealt with criticism.

We never like to be criticized. One Sunday, a little lady came out my church door. She said, "Pastor, I wouldn't hurt you for anything in the world!" I stepped back, because I knew I was about to get hurt!

Then she told me, "I want you to know that what I'm going to say, I will say in love." I stepped back again and grabbed onto the pillars of the church, because I knew that something was going to explode!

Once in awhile someone will come to us and say, "Now, I know you preachers don't like to be complimented." That person is not talking to me; I like to be complimented. And if you say that you do not like compliments, the only difference between you and me is that I am telling the truth!

Let us observe how problems, criticisms, and murmurings were handled in that first church. When criticism comes, we need to examine it and see if there are any elements of truth there. We should not immediately become defensive.

A young man had just completed his seminary training and was preaching his first sermon. In the audience he saw an old, godly, saintly bishop. After the message was completed, the man approached the bishop. "Sir, how did you like my sermon?"

He replied, "Young man, are you tired?"

"No, Sir."

"Remember, Son, when you preach, somebody gets tired."

How did the early apostles deal with criticism? First of all, we need to find out what the criticism concerned. The Hellenistic Jews accused the Jerusalem Jews of not treating their widows fairly in the distribution of the bread. In the

administration of the church, these foreign Jews who had forgotten their Hebrew felt that they were being short changed.

Actually, the judgement was leveled toward the twelve apostles. They could have resented the criticism by saying, "You mean that you are accusing us of not going out to distribute food and bread? Who do you think taught us to distribute bread? We learned at the hands of the Master as he fed the four - and the five thousand."

Or they could have taken the martyr complex and replied, "Oh, we are so burdened with the administration of the church, with all the activities and growth; there is so much hustle and bustle in taking in three thousand and then four thousand people; you don't know how hard we are working!"

Or you could face it in the way those apostles did. Evidently, they recognized that there was some germ of truth in the remarks of those Hellenistic Jews. They decided, "It is not right that we should give up the ministry of the Word and serve the tables."

Do you see the plight of those early apostles, my brethern? They were involved in all the administration paraphernalia and the pressure of the church; the movement and the activity. They counseled, visited the sick, distributed the food, tried to care for all the widows: they got on side roads and began to major on activities which were secondary.

Question: Could this happen to a denomination?

Question: Could this happen to a church?

Question: Could this happen to you and me, to those of us here, as leaders and servants of our churches?

An old man pastored a little downtown church for a long time. From his death bed, he wrote this letter to the congregation: "Never move the church from its present location. The church makes a great mistake when it gets on side streets."

On the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, those ten days which shook the world, there was a conference of priests in Moscow, dealing with the liturgy of the church. When the first shots were fired some six blocks away, they were debating whether they should wear a yellow or white surplice in certain parts of the service. Side streets.

When I was a boy in Mississippi, we had in our town a church which was a very holy church. If you asked them what the "holiness" meant, they would tell you, "no makeup" and "no jewelry." They would say to you as quick as zig-zag lightening that this was what serving the Almighty meant. Side streets.

Recently, Episcopalians had a convention at which they were discussing merger with the Presbyterians. After three or four days, a delegate was interviewed. He said, "Any semblance to this gathering and Christianity is purely coincidental." Side Streets.

Almost four weeks ago, I called Dr. Charles Allen, pastor of the largest Methodist church in the world, the First United Methodist Church of Houston, Texas, with over 12,000 members. I said, "Dr. Allen, I want to ask you a question." (And I have his permission to quote him.) I said, "Dr. Allen, why is the Methodist church dying?"

He said, "I'll tell you why. I just got back from a conference yesterday. We met in Indianapolis for eleven days. Five hundred of the leading laymen in the Methodist church and five hundred bishops, district superintendents, and leading pastors attended. We met to map out the strategy for the Methodist church until we meet four years from now. In those eleven days, not one time in any of the meetings or in any of the discussions did anybody say anything about winning somebody to Jesus Christ. Not one time did I hear any reference to Bible study or Sunday School. Not one time did we talk about stewardship. Not one time in those eleven days did we mention prayer."

And I said, "What happened in your church? How did your denomination come to this plight, sir?"

He replied, "We elected mediocrity to leadership, and they became housekeepers."
Side Streets.

Ladies and gentlemen, it breaks my heart to say this - and I stand before you "prayed up" - but I am fearful that we, of the Southern Baptist Convention, are on far, far too many side streets. Every great denomination in America has gone down this same trail. Side streets.

Let me try to do something statistically. Our membership is at an all-time high. We have heard that some thirteen and one-half million people are Southern Baptists, the largest non-Catholic, Christian body in America.

Stewardship in our churches is at an all-time high. Last year, we took in two billion, eighty-six million (\$2,086,000,000) dollars. For some of us, a billion dollars is hard to understand. I explain it to myself like this: A billion dollars is a thousand million dollars! Let's look at what we did with this money.

Our total foreign mission budget was only seventy-six million (\$76,000,000) dollars. What did our three-thousand missionaries do with the funds? This year they will win in excess of ninety thousand people on our mission fields to Jesus Christ. This is an encouraging word!

Now what did we do - in all of our churches, in all of our denominational structure - with that left-over part, that two billion, nine or ten million dollars? What did we do? We baptized last year some three hundred, sixty-eight thousand. (This is less than the number which we baptized ten years ago!) Our membership is up a million, seven or eight hundred thousand. You can look at the past ten years on a chart and see the little lines going up and down.

I know that you cannot equate money necessarily with evangelism, but to say this another way: in our Southern Baptist Convention - all the pastors, staff members, evangelists; all those in our institutions and our agencies and our seminaries; all of those who are employed in a full-time Christian sense (most of them are ordained) - there are conservatively one hundred thousand (100,000) full-time, vocational Christian servants, pastors, and so forth in our denomination.

Take away the biological growth from this three hundred sixty-eight thousand (368,000) we baptized last year in America (by biological growth, I mean the boys and girls who come up naturally in our warm-hearted churches. They have an experience with Jesus Christ - a wonderful, magnificent experience.) If we subtract biological growth and get out in the hard, tough, pagan areas of our world - remembering that over one hundred thousand (100,000) are full-time vocational Christians - pastors and so forth - among us, we averaged winning about one and a half persons each to Jesus Christ!

Let me tell you, for many, many months I have looked for evidences of boldness in our denomination; and I'll tell you that it has been as scarce as hen's teeth! We had in our reports the other day the fact that in the past three years of Bold Mission Thrust we have reached our Sunday School goal: we have started over three thousand and thirteen (3,013) new Sunday Schools. That sounds good, but look at the total picture, and you will discover that our Sunday School enrollment over the past three years has declined more than one hundred forty thousand (140,000).

Since it is difficult for me to think in terms of millions and billions, I showed these figures to a business executive who could help me to be accurate in my conclusion. I was looking for a positive word to say, a loving word, a conciliatory word, a healing word, a triumphant word. I asked of the executive, "Look at these figures in a secular sense and help me."

He said, "What is the product of your denomination? What are you trying to get out there?"

I replied, "Let me say that I believe what we are about in all of our churches, all of our bureaucracy, and in everything we do - we are about the business first of all of winning and discipling people to Jesus Christ."

He said, "Well, as I look at all the funding which you are spending - one-third to two-thirds more money than you did ten years ago - as I look at all the increased numbers of staff members in your churches, and all the increased bureaucracy, and all the other expenditures you are having (And recognize now, our giving is up one hundred forty-four percent (144%) this past decade, and that is thirty percent (30%) more than inflation in America.); and seeing that you are baptizing less than the number which you baptized ten years ago and that your Sunday School enrollment is virtually the same as it was, I would look at those figures and would call the Southern Baptist Convention the 'Chrysler Motor Corporation'!"

Brethren, that did something to me. I talked to a denominational leader the other day, and he said, "I want to soar like an eagle, but I'm surrounded by a bunch of turkeys. All they want to do is push forms and programs."

Let me say another plain, simple word. According to Baptist polity, our denominational people in our agencies and institutions are servants; they are not kings or bishops.

And let me say another word. I am convinced that the leadership which we have today are Spirit-filled, evangelistic men who are seeking in every way possible to breath new life into some of our old forms.

You see, folks, we are getting things mixed up. The highest tribunal of the Southern Baptist Convention is not Nashville or Richmond or Birmingham or Dallas; it is not even the Annuity Board! It is the local church!

Our denominational people are the equippers. They are the servants. They are equivalent to the diaconate in the local church. Therefore, our sterility cannot be blamed on our denominational servants. The truth is we in our local churches have not been bold!

The Bible gives us a clear word concerning what we are to do. What did those early apostles do? They heard the criticism. They recognized it, and they went out and elected seven deacons.

I am convinced that there are many, many gifted laymen in our congregations who are ready to do some bold witnessing, bold serving, bold living, and bold sacrificing. We stand back and wonder why para-church groups are gleaning off so much of our funds, and so much of our talents. Could it be that some of these are touching heart-felt needs, and they are freeing up the laity to exercise their New Testament and spiritual gifts?

We need to look at ourselves. We need to put down the guns and go fishing again!! That's what we need to do.

Do you know what happened when the apostles quit fooling around with all the paper shuffling and got their priorities right? They said, "We are going to spend our time in continual prayer and preaching." And what took place? The scripture says, "and that church multiplied greatly." It will happen every time!

Hear me carefully, because it is directed to myself more than anybody here. I pray that we will go before Jesus as a congregation this morning, and say simply, "Lord Jesus Christ, teach us to pray." We can become too big, too powerful, too strong, too filled with glory, too eaten up with our own pride and our own vastness for God to use us. He is going to have to break us in order to use us again, brethren. I don't like to be broken.

When Moses came down from the mountain, there was a glory about him. His face shown. Others could see the "shekinah," but Moses did not know it. Contrast that with Sampson. He went out to fight the Philistines "as of old." And the Bible says, "He wist not the Lord was departed."

There are so many brethren among us whose lives are aglow with a saintliness, with a holiness, with a shekinah glory. They touch lives; they love people. They give of themselves and their ministry whenever they are, to the least, the last, and the lost; and they don't even know it! How they are growing spiritually and maturing in the Word.

While at the same time, there are others among us who may have big titles before their names, who have the idea that they can go out and fight the Philistines "as of old." Listen, just because once we could tear down the Gates of Gaza does not mean that we can do it now!

These early apostles gave themselves to prayer. I'll tell you something: the hardest thing in the world for me to do is to pray. I don't know about you! To get a hold of God every day and to let Him get a hold of me; to confess, to intercede, to love, to bless, to listen, to cry, to laugh, to doubt, to fear - oh, to praise; that is hard for me to do! But we must give prayer priority in our ministries.

The second thing we are to do is to preach. And that is the second hardest thing which I do. I guess the reason why I have failed so many times is that it is so tough. It is painful to preach.

Read the lives of the great preachers, and you will come away with the sense of their own unworthiness. This encourages my personal belief that the gift of preaching is given to the least.

Notice Moses did not want the job. Amos did not want the job. Jeremiah did not want the job. It is not a job you want; it is not a job you seek. It is

the task, the job, the vocation to which you are called. You must have the clear, inner conviction that you are doing exactly and precisely what God want you to do. The Word of God must be in your heart, burning like a fire shut up in your bones. And then when we preach, we know that we do not create anything; but we are simply the midwife instrument in the birthing of the creation...of God becoming a man... and we proclaim it to the world.

That is what preaching is like. When our sermons lead us beyond where we have been before, and if our sermons seem to take on a life of their own, and if we say things we wish to God we did not have to say, and if your own preaching begins to lay claims within your own heart, we must understand that the Holy Spirit of God is working in and through us, his preachers, to the people. This simply confirms our call to the ministry. And it is important that we do not let anyone discourage us from fulfilling this call.

I'll tell you, preaching is painful. If you really preach, there will be philosophers who will ridicule everything you say. There will be skeptics who will laugh at the God you love. There will be carnal men who will run over you if you preach, because they are running from Jesus. The greatest tragedy is the brethren: they will wound you, too, if you really preach.

It is painful to preach; it is tough to preach. If you are called by God to preach, all your weekends are already full from now until you die! You don't have time for that ballgame or that TV show on Saturday night - or the recreation or social invitation. You will have to drop out of some clubs because about Friday morning, after you have prayed and worked all week - you have something scribbled down or written up - you begin to feel those butterflies. You begin to feel that anxiety. You begin to feel that tension.

You get up early on Sunday morning, and you go to the Lord and begin to pray, "O, God, I'm unprepared again. But I've worked and I've prayed and I can't do it! Saying a word for You is a holy thing, and only the Holy Spirit can do it." And you go out and stand up and preach yourself empty. The glory is gone out. You're done; you're finished.

Remember what James Stewart said: "Any sermon well preached causes the preacher to die a little." You cannot preach flat-footed. Preaching shortens your life! But we do it, even though there is pain in it, because we are called to do it like the sailor is called to the sea. Even though this pulpit will hurt us, we cannot resist its allure. The pulpit will break your heart a hundred times over; but you keep preaching! Why? Because you love it and God calls you to it. No great movement, revival, or reformation in the history of mankind has ever begun except through a praying pulpit. It is still the pulpit which draws people to a saving Jesus. Where preaching is honored by pastor and people, it draws as nothing else.

Preaching is a deed which takes place when God acts on His Word and His Word is proclaimed through a preacher who believes and lives what he proclaims. It is painful; but oh, what joy.

You see, folks, every sermon is a Bethlehem. Above it the angels are singing. Around it the stars are shining. And you, the preacher - like Mary of old, brooded over by the Holy Spirit - out of the travail of your own life, comes forth that Living Word. Then the preacher stands back and sees what Mary saw: simple men like shepherds, wise men like those ancient kings, all come and bow down - not in acclamation for the sermon, but in adoration and acceptance of the Lord.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we in our churches get our priorities right and give first place to prayer and preaching, no longer will there be mild-mannered sermons delivered to mild-mannered congregations by mild-mannered preachers on how

to be more mild-mannered. When the Word is biblically proclaimed with unction and passion, and priority is given in the church to prayer and to preaching, the church will come alive. Then, no longer will the Southern Baptist Convention have to live on...side streets!