

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM - PART I**“An Adventure In Spiritual Pioneering”**

A Sermon by

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Mark 1:14-15

There are many things about this Church which excite me. Consequently, there were many reasons why I was so clearly convinced God was leading me here and I should say “yes” to the call to become your Pastor.

The main factor in that decision, I think, was the tremendous caliber of people in this Church (and I'm not saying this to flatter you), but honestly, I have never seen a Church where so many people possessed so much in the way of ability, leadership and potential.

I was convinced, and still am, that if the members of this Church ever really sold out to Christ and the will of God for their lives, there would be absolutely nothing we could not do. There would be no task too great...no challenge too large...but what we could triumph.

It all hinged, of course, on that gigantic “if”. “IF” each and every member became seriously committed to Christ and to the will of God for their lives.

With that explanation, I think you can understand why one of the most rewarding and personally gratifying experiences of my life has been the expression on the part of so many of you for a closer walk with Christ. For this is the prime pre-requisite which must be met before we can make any real and lasting progress.

Some of you have told me personally of your concern. Many more have expressed it by giving eager response to our teaching and preaching ministry in the past two years. Still others have demonstrated their desire by being willing and even anxious to serve their Master in any way

possible.

All of this is an indication to me that in the lives of our people there is a growing discontent with
the shallow,
the transparent
and the anemic.

That the real burden of your heart is the same as mine...a hunger for the deeper things of the
Spirit.

All of us are thinking more seriously than we were a few years back. Perhaps we can thank our
tense and troubled world for that. These trying times have pierced the shell of our false sense of
security and awakened us to the realization that we do not have the world on a string, dancing on
our fingers.

Have you ever noticed how hard it is to turn your thoughts to God when all is going well? When
we're sitting on top of the world and seem to have everything we want, we have a way of pushing
Him off to some cobwebbed corner of our life. But as C. S. Lewis suggests,

“to say ‘we have all we want’ is tragic when ‘all’
does not include God.”

So often in the past we found God to be

an interruption...

an intrusion...

a disturbance.

We were too busy with our trivialities to have time for the Eternal. How tragic! For as St.
Augustine declared:

“God wants to give us a blessing but cannot. Our
hands are so full of things there is no place for Him
to put it.”

Well, slowly but surely we have begun to wake up to our need. We have discovered we do *not*
have all we want:

There are huge gaping holes in our lives.

What we profess, we do not always possess.

We are in need of something far more revolutionary than we have ever had before.

Well, the most revolutionary thing about which I know was announced the day Jesus said:

“The kingdom of God is at hand”.

He was not promising a physical kingdom

with thrones

and princes

and prime ministers.

He was announcing a new Spiritual Commonwealth to be composed of all those who were willing to do God's will. It was something far different from the political kingdoms people had been promised before. It was to be

moral and spiritual...

invisible and internal...

a secret kingdom of the soul.

For He said,

“The Kingdom of God is within you”.

And then He spent the better part of His earthly ministry trying to show people what that meant.

He likened it to seed sown in a field.

Some falling on barren soil and never growing at all.

Some lacking proper care and only growing for a little while before dying again. Some falling on rich soil, receiving good care and producing a rich, golden harvest of grain.

He said,

“You are the soil. You are also the one who must tend it. You alone will determine its productiveness.

I have planted the seeds of revolution within you.

If you nurture them, they will grow and will

transform your life. And, through *your* life, they will transform the world. It's up to you.”

Another time He likened it to a group of people who had been given a gift of wealth.

One squandered it.

One hoarded it.

One used it wisely and it grew.

“I hope you'll be like the last person and let the gift I have given you multiply and grow within your heart.”

But the simile which is most expressive to me is the one I am using as a theme for this series of sermons on Abundant Living.

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

Now “keys” suggest rooms to me. Rooms containing all sorts of wonderful treasures...but rooms which are closed off behind locked doors. To me, Jesus is saying,

“When you accepted me as your savior you became joint heir with me to all the wealth of my Father's kingdom. I am giving you an advance payment on that legacy. Enough to enable you to live (in the spiritual sense) a life of luxury and abundance. Here are the keys to those spiritual treasures:

Faith.

Love.

Prayer.

Forgiveness.

Obedience.

Use them and go ahead! Unlock the doors to the

treasure rooms of your heart and walk into a brand
new life of

gracious,

glorious,

victorious,

abundant living.

Release the spiritual powers imprisoned within you
and learn to live. Really live!”

That's what The Keys Of The Kingdom mean to me: LIFE! And that's what they can and must mean to you. In the coming weeks I shall try, as best I know how, to show you what they are and how to use them.

This morning I want to preface what is to come with a word of caution. When you begin to take Christ seriously, you are playing with dynamite. The Keys we will be talking about in weeks to come can unlock painful forces which will radically alter

your sense of values...

the way you live...

yes, even the way you think.

That does not mean you should avoid them. To the contrary seek them out, only don't toy with them. They are too volatile for that.

When Jody was little more than a year old, Lucille and I bought her a wading pool. She took to the water like a duck, without the slightest fear. She'd splash and play around in it and we were convinced that very shortly she would learn to swim.

One day during our travels we stopped at a lovely motel which had a swimming pool for its guests. Immediately Jody headed for the water. Her little pool had been ankle deep, so when she came to the swimming pool she jumped right in. To her great surprise she discovered that

apparently there wasn't any bottom to *this* pool. Fortunately, another motel guest and I were there. We pulled her out, a sputtering, wet, very frightened little girl.

It was a long time before she would play in water again. As a matter of fact, it was not until this summer on our vacation that she began to overcome her fear. There was a beautiful beach outside our cabin. At first she would only wade out into the water until it was six or eight inches above her ankles. Then, as she began to gain confidence, she was ready to learn to float.

When she discovered the water would hold her up, she was no longer satisfied to wade in the shallows. She wanted to move out into the deep again.

Many of us have had a Christian experience similar to Jody's swimming experience. We approached the Christian life with eagerness and hunger. Our conversion was a glorious delight. We had a great desire to make rapid progress and plunged right in. Then we discovered there is no end to where we can go along the Christian way! Originally we had thought consecrated living consisted of conquering the overt, obvious sins of the flesh. And, for the most part, that was not too hard. But the further we progressed in this purging of self, the more we discovered areas in our life which needed to be purged.

When we got beyond the outward and the obvious, we stepped into the realm of the inner and the subtle. We came face to face with the secret sins of the spirit.

We discovered that Jesus meant exactly what He said. He wanted us to leave *all* and follow Him. And we were frightened at the prospect.

Unconditional surrender...

absolute obedience...

and rigid discipline

to the High Command of Heaven was not part of our planning when we decided to be Christians. We wanted to be happy, but we also wanted to be free. We wanted to enjoy the thrill of religion

without any of its perils. When we discovered the high cost of real Christian living, we made a speedy retreat back into the shallow eddies which play along the spiritual shore. But thank God Christ would not leave us alone. With wisdom and patience He continually pressed each advantage. In a hundred ways, He reawakened that desire for the best which God has to offer. Slowly but surely we began to see that we, too, could be more than conquerors with Him at our side.

Remembering some of our earlier victories over sin and satan and self, we began to grow dissatisfied with our shallow, meaningless, earthy living. With cautious, determined steps we began, once again, to explore those deep reservoirs of the Christian life in which alone are found the clear, cool, refreshing waters of the Spirit.

I think many of us are at that point in the Christian adventure this morning. We are discontented with what we are, but we are also dismayed at the thought of what we might become if we let go and let God have His way in our life.

Because we know ourselves and our past failings so well, we are just the least bit hesitant to launch out into the deep, lest frightened by the first wave which washes over us, we will turn and, with dripping wings and rusty halo, run back into the shallows again.

May I remind you of the thing I am trying to teach Jody. To swim successfully, she must relax and allow herself to be held by the greater power of the water. If she will conquer her fear and disposition to panic, the water will keep her safely.

Therefore, let this be your assurance this morning as we begin

An Adventure In Spiritual Pioneering:

When you commit yourself without condition, without the restraint of doubt which creates spiritual tensions...

when you commit yourself unconditionally to the care and keeping and direction of Christ, you

are held by a Power which is greater than yourself. And, you are secure!

The rise and fall of circumstances which surround you leave you unharmed. You lose your fear of the spiritual depths into which you have moved. And, you experience the exhilarating delight of abundant living as Christ promised it.

Let me hasten to add, however, this kind of heroic living is not easy. It is the product of hard work and real sacrifice. It is only fair to warn you of this. A traveler about to embark upon a journey is entitled to know the road conditions ahead. And the warning sign most apropos this morning is

“Dangerous But Passable”.

It's like getting married. I have often drawn an analogy between the marriage relationship and the relationship of the Christians to their Lord. That's nothing new. Paul did it nineteen hundred years ago. But in the premarital counseling sessions I have with every couple I am asked to marry, I try to emphasize clearly and unmistakably that my pronouncing them man and wife is no guarantee of happiness.

After all is said and done, marriage is just plain, ordinary hard work. Up until the time of their wedding and through their honeymoon, their relationship may be all peaches and cream. But from then on, it will be Bon Ami and elbow grease!

The turning point in every marriage is that critical moment when the honeymoon ends and, upon waking one morning, two starry-eyed people discover they are stuck with each other! They will have to live together the rest of their lives!!

Mature people with mature love

heave a heavy sigh,

take a deep breath,

grit their teeth (figuratively speaking), and go on from there. They work at it and they discover married life can be beautiful.

Many couples never survive the shock of awakening to the real world. From that rude awakening they are either blaming the other person for being such a disappointment, or are making preparations for the day when their relationship can be dissolved.

Marriage is not easy.

It requires patience,
dedicated discipline
and hard work.

It means blending two personalities with separate backgrounds, educations, environment, heredity and training into one. And that blending is not easy. There is much friction. There are times when it is difficult to make the rough places straight. But it's worth the effort, for the stakes are high and the reward is great.

Sometimes a marital problem arises because one or both of the partners lacks the maturity necessary to live within the confining restrictions of the marriage relationship. A truly happy marriage is the result of the absolute loyalty of each individual to the other. It means the end of those footloose, fancy-free days when one was able to do as he pleased with whom he pleased. It means the repudiation of those old associations and entanglements. It means the total dedication of love and loyalty to the one person chosen as life partner.

It would be a strange marriage, wouldn't it, if, while professing her love for her husband, a wife chose to live in a separate apartment on the other side of town with some of her old chums? It would be a strange marriage, wouldn't it, if, while professing his love for his wife, a husband constantly made dates with former girl friends of his bachelor days, plus a few new ones tossed in for good measure?

You see, there are certain sacrifices we make and certain freedoms we deny ourselves when we

enter the marriage relationship. To refuse to live by those disciplines and restraints can only result in chaos. To abide by them will result in happiness and bliss.

Now then, let me see if I can bring this into focus as an illustration of our relationship to Christ.

Christian happiness is not guaranteed by simply saying,

“I believe in Jesus and accept Him as my Savior”.

That is the starting place. The point of embarkation from which we must all take leave of the old life. But from that time on, it is a constant blending of two personalities into one. The blending of your personality into that of Christ.

Often after the initial glow of the conversion experience is passed and, as young Christian, we get down to the hard business of living the Christian life, and recognize we are now obliged to abide by the decision we have made, we begin to falter and fall. We begin to cast wistful glances over our shoulder at the past. We rebel at the disciplines of the Christian life. We long for the footloose, fancy-free days when we could do

as we pleased,

when we pleased,

and with whom we pleased.

We gamble on taking the middle road of social conformity and spiritual compromise and, as a result, we lose all.

Paul said:

“Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed” (Romans 12:2).

Now that isn't very popular. The world does not care for those who are “too good” any more than it likes those who are “too bad”. Calvary is a dramatic illustration of that. Christ was “too good”. The thieves were “too bad”. And they crucified them both!

If you begin to take Christ seriously, that's apt to happen to you. Right now the popular idea of

our world is

social integration,

social adjustment

and conformity.

It is unthinkable for anyone to differ from the crowd. The American boast of individualism has become a hollow joke. We have been as thoroughly conditioned as were the people of Germany under Hitler and the Russians under Stalin.

Oh, there have been no concentration camps. No secret police. No death threats. But the job of brain washing has been done none the less. The proof of its effectiveness is found in the fact that, for the most part, we are not even aware of what has happened to us. But, whether we recognize it or not, far too many of us have taken on the faceless image of the mass man.

Anyone who resists membership in this cult of mediocrity...who determines not to become part of the Cult of the Common Man is considered a kill-joy.

A spoil-sport.

An old fashioned fogey.

Well, if conformity to the ways of the world is the price of social acceptance, let's recognize it and be done with it! As A. W. Toser says,

“We who call ourselves Christians are supposed to
be a people set apart, people who have repudiated
the wisdom of this world and have adopted the
wisdom of the cross as our guide to living. We have
cast our lot with the One who, while He lived on
earth, was the most unadjusted of the sons of men.
He simply would not be integrated into society. He
stood above it and condemned it by withdrawing
from it. Die for it He would. But surrender to it, He

would not!”

If we would know the supreme happiness of abundant living, then we must repudiate the values we held during the days of our spiritual bachelorhood. To quote Toser again,

“Christ, and not society, must become our pattern.

We must seek adjustment, not to the world, but to the will of God. We must recognize the world for what it is, a sinking ship from which we can escape, not by integration, but by abandonment.”

And so, I give to you a charge which you will hear again and again in coming weeks. You *can* live victoriously. You *can* know the sheer delight of abundant living...any moment you choose. You will require nothing more than you already possess for in your hands are The Keys Of The Kingdom. If you choose to use them, the power of God will flow into your life.

I caution you again: it will not be easy. A mother once said to her son,

“Aren't you ashamed to be lying here so late in bed?”

The boy answered,

“Yes, mother, I'm ashamed, but I'd rather be ashamed than get up.”

The church is full of Christians who are ashamed of the shallow way in which they are living. They are not happy about their moral and spiritual lives. But they would rather be ashamed than get up and do something about it. They lack the courage to become spiritual pioneers and consequently they deny themselves the delectable riches which can only be theirs through pioneering.

In the wonderful story, “The King and I”, there is one very moving scene. It comes near the end of the play after Anna and the King of Siam had finally parted ways. She and her young son are in her room packing their belongings in preparation for the long trek back to England. The King's first wife comes bearing the sad news that he is dying.

Anna had been unaware of the King's illness and she is deeply grieved. Though they had had a serious misunderstanding, throughout the long years of their working together a deep and lasting friendship had grown up between them.

It is then that her young son asks the question:

“Mother, was he the best king he could have been?”

And Anna gives this answer:

“I don't think any man is ever the best king he could have been...but this one tried.”

That is what God is asking of you this morning. Not so much that you achieve, but that you try to achieve. That's all any of us can do. We can take The Keys Of The Kingdom which God has placed within our hands, and we can unlock the faith and love and forgiveness and obedience imprisoned within us.

We can turn our back upon the god of conformity. We can disassociate ourselves from the Cult of the Common Man. And, we can pray that when we stand before our God and the question is asked,

“Was he as good a Christian as he could have been?”

And the voice of eternal truth replies,

“No one is ever as good a Christian as he could have been”,
that Christ will press forward, put His loving arm around us and answer,

“Yes, I know, but this one tried.”