

SIGNS OF LIFE®
Evangelist Johnnie Lavender
Lk. 8:55; 7:15; Jn. 11:44

It happened during a crusade in one of our eastern cities. The congregation was singing the last verse of the invitation hymn. I noticed a dignified looking man standing a bit to my right, about two rows back, on the end of the aisle. I could see he was troubled about something, so I stepped over to him to see if I could be of assistance. I don't usually do that, but there was no personal worker I could send, so I went myself.

He was unknown to me. I hadn't seen him before that night. I later learned from the pastor he was a deacon and a prominent member of the church. But not knowing him, I said, **Are you a Christian?** Somewhat surprised, he answered, **I hope so.** I said, **Is that all you can say?** He looked rather startled and said, **What more do you want me say?** I replied, **I'd like you to say you *know* you're a Christian.**

The gentleman hesitated for a moment and then said, **Preacher, I think that would be presumptuous on my part. I don't believe I'll know that for sure, until I meet God face-to-face.**

Beloved, it is not presumptuous for you to say you know you're a Christian. In fact, it is a sin against grace and a breach of faith to say anything less. For praise God, you can know with absolute certainty whether or not you have passed from death unto life.

I've rarely received as much blessing from reading the Bible as I have these last few days. The Bible has an answer for every difficulty. It is a never-ending reservoir of strength in time of need. Peter Heylen penned these words about the Bible back in the 16th century--

If thou art merry, here are airs;

If melancholy, here are prayers;

If studious, here are those things writ
Which may deserve thy ablest wit.
If hungry, here is food divine;
If thirsty, nectar, heavenly wine. @

One day while reading through the New Testament, I discovered there are certain distinguishing marks -- certain signs of life -- which make it plain whether or not one is truly a Christian. In the Gospels there are recorded three instances where Jesus raised the dead. In each, a different, yet significant sign of life is illustrated. I want you to look at them with me this evening to see if we can, behind the obvious, capture the deeper truths therein concealed.

I want you to measure yourself in the light of these signs of life, to determine the reality of your Christian experience. And I want you to do so -- not as a ~~Adead works@activity~~ through which you hope to *become* a Christian -- but, rather, as a ~~Aby their fruits you shall know them@activity~~ which will allow you to determine the extent to which you are being a Christian. Have you got it? Please say ~~Ayes. @~~ Great!

EATING

The first of these signs of life is given to us in the eighth chapter of Luke where ~~we're~~ told of Christ=s raising the daughter of Jairus. In the 55th verse we read that she who was dead, ~~Aarose~~ straightway: and (Jesus) commanded (that they) *give her meat.* @ So eating is a sign of life.

One of my favorite stories is about an Englishman, an American and a Scotchman, each of whom ordered a bowl of soup. As the soup was delivered, three flies circling overhead made a landing ~~B~~ one in each bowl of soup. The Englishman picked up a spoon, gently lifted the fly out of the soup and deposited it on the saucer. The American reached over, flicked his finger and knocked the fly out of the soup onto the floor. The Scotchman studied the situation for a moment and then reaching in with both hands, grabbed the fly by its wings and said, ~~A~~ Spit it out. Spit out. @ Well, we may not be that ~~AScotch@or Apersnickety@~~ about soup, but eating is a sign of life. And

one of the distinguishing marks that labels a person either saint or sinner is what he or she eats. I'm not talking about the things one might consume to maintain his or her physical strength. What I have in mind is his or her choice of spiritual nourishment. The literature she reads. The influences under which he places himself. The company he or she keeps. All of these are dead giveaways to the inner quality and character of a person.

How does the Christian eat? How do you feed your soul? How do you distinguish yourself as one of the spiritually alive?

First of all, through **Bible study**.

Just as a newborn baby must feed at her mother's breast to gain strength and grow, so too, the newborn child of God must feed regularly at the well of milk and honey which flows from the heart of the scriptures. And not only so, but as he grows daily, a Christian must dig deeper and find therein the real meat of the Word, which is the staff of life.

A child growing into young adulthood without being weaned from her mother's breast would be considered abnormal, a victim of retarded development. Likewise, a Christian who flits hither and yon throughout the scriptures, gaining pleasant platitudes, but never growing, never developing, never expanding spiritually, soon shrinks into a spiritual anemic. And, if you would show signs of life, you must read his word.

The Bible is creative. It grows people. As someone has said, **A** The Bible is more than a piece of literature. It is a revelation. It is more than a museum of Oriental curios. It is a spiritual treasure house. **@** It is beyond compare. Above reproach. Outside the sphere of rivalry. It is God's book and it is meant for you. It reveals his will. It reviews his love. It reveres his son. And if you desire to know about Jesus, if you wish to discover God's will for your life, if you aim to distinguish yourself as one of his chosen children, you must do it through persistent, personal Bible study.

This is one of the signs of life. How about it? Do you measure up?

Now remember, I'm not advocating a ~~Adead works@~~activity whereby you add something to the shed blood of Jesus to *earn* salvation. What I'm asking you to look for B and our text is describing -- is the evidentiary ~~Afruit@~~of salvation. Christians show forth certain signs of life, and regular feeding on the word of God is one of them. How about it?

Another way a Christian eats is through **prayer**. I was in a ministers meeting some months ago. We were discussing the various perils with which a minister must learn to deal. As we went around the circle each one of us mentioned this peril or that which a minister must guard against. Finally, it came time for our guest of honor, Dr. Howard Thurman B that great Negro scholar and Christian -- to speak. In his quiet, considered way Dr. Thurman said, ~~AB~~rother preachers, how much do you pray?@

It was as if we'd been shot. Each of us was deeply conscious-stricken as we searched our hearts on that question. Oh, we had many excuses. We had been busy at this or that. Hunting texts. Preparing sermons. Comforting the sick. Visiting the sorrowful. Arranging for funerals. Serving on committees. Doing the endless tasks of a minister. Yet somehow, as we faced up to the question, as we laid our hearts bare before Almighty God, we realized not one of these puny excuses was good enough. We had failed to pray as we ought. Not one of us in that group of 50 or more had made enough of prayer.

May I ask, ~~A~~How much do you pray?@ Prayer is more than a privilege. It is that, to be sure. It is a glorious, blessed, priceless privilege. But Jesus said, ~~AM~~en ought always to pray and not to faint. Why? ~~A~~Prayer is power!@ That's why! As someone has said, ~~AM~~uch prayer is much power. Little prayer is little power. No prayer is no power. Tennyson was right when he said, ~~A~~More things are wrought by prayer than this world ever dreams. And my Bible tells me that, ~~A~~The effectual, fervent prayers of a righteous man availeth much. @

Some people wonder why their church is half-empty. Why their pastor seems discouraged. Why things aren't getting done. I'll tell you why. Christians aren't praying! If I had to put up with the bickering, backbiting, lack of faith and prayerless pews some pastors face, I'd be more

discouraged than they are.. To hear some Christians talk, you'd think God is dead.

I read somewhere (I believe it was in a mission magazine) that in the Hunan province in China, a certain church refused to follow its pastor's leadership in undertaking an unquestionably Christian, but difficult challenge, on the grounds it involved too much risk and offered too little chance of success.

The following Sunday morning, when the congregation arrived, they found their pastor dressed in sackcloth and ashes, beating his head against the floor and wailing as if he had lost his best friend. **A**Who's dead?**@** They asked. **A**Haven't you heard?**@**the pastor answered. **A**God's dead!**@** **A**The man's crazy,**@**they exclaimed. **A**Of course God isn't dead.**@** Whereupon the pastor turned to them and said, **A**Then why don't you act as if he were alive!**@**

Beloved, God is not dead. He lives. And he longs for you to call upon him for strength. Phillips Brooks once said, **A**Do not pray for a task commensurate to your strength. Pray for a strength commensurate to your task.**@**

The reason churches fail, the reason pastors falter, the reason things don't get done, is because Christian people fail to pray. Someone has said, **A**Prayerless pews make a powerless pulpit.**@** It is equally true that a praying people make a powerful preacher.

One of my most cherished possessions is a little slip of paper upon which is printed a poem. It was sent to me by a dear saint **B** some 60 or more years of age. She heard me preach over the radio when I was back east. I've never met her and the writing on the letter was so poor I was unable to make out her name. But I know that if I never meet her down here, I'll greet her on the other side and we'll share sweet fellowship at the feet of our precious Lord. Here's the poem she sent me:

AI like to feel that though on earth we never meet,
Yet we may hold heart fellowship
At God's dear feet.

I like to think in all the work thou hast to do,
That I, by lifting hands of prayer;
May help thee, too.

I like to think that in the path his love prepares,
Thy steps may sometimes stronger be
Through secret prayers.

I like to think that when on high results we see,
Perchance thou wilt rejoice that
I thus prayed for thee. @

Do you know what I do when I'm lonely? When I am discouraged? When the meetings are not going well? Do you know what I do? I get off by myself, open my Bible, take out this slip of paper and remember that dear soul back in Philadelphia somewhere. That mother in Chicago. That young person in Wisconsin. That couple in California. That grey-haired preacher down in Texas. I remember the hundreds of saints who have promised to pray for this young preacher, and soon the gloom is gone and the glory of God floods my soul.

Yes, the practice of persistent, fervent prayer is a sign of life. How about it? Is that A piece of fruit@being born in you?

Then too, a Christian finds spiritual nourishment by **joining and working in a local church**. You say, **ACan't I be a Christian, can't I feed my soul, can't I show signs of life without joining the church?@** Well, yes, but I wouldn't advise it. As somebody has said, **AYou can get to Europe without going on a ship, but it's a long swim and you better look out for the sharks. @**

Why join the church? Because you need the church. You need the fellowship of others. You

need the strength which being with other Christians, gives. You need the opportunities for service the church offers. You need the spiritual nourishment faithful attendance brings. You need the church.

You should join the church because the church needs you. It needs your life. Your enthusiasm. Your ideas. Your goals. Your time. Your tithe. Your talent. The church needs all you have to give in terms of service and sacrifice and self-giving. Yes, the church needs you.

But the most important reason you should be a member of and active in the church is because the world needs what you and the church can give it together. The church is the only institution Jesus founded. It is God's one and only agency for the spreading abroad of Christian truths. It has the one message that can cure the ailing hearts of lost humanity. And if you want to bear the evidentiary ~~A~~fruit@ of a born-again believer, then you'll get into the life of a church where you live, because the world needs what you and that church can give it.

Eating is a sign of life. The eating of the word. That devouring of minutes and hours in prayer. The relishing of Christian companionship and fellowship as it is found in the church of Christ. All of these are distinguishing marks which label you as a child of God. How about it? Eating is a sign of life. Do your eating habits betray you?

TALKING

The second sign of life mentioned in the New Testament is found in the seventh chapter of Luke. There we read the story of Christ's raising the widow's son. And in verse 15 we're told, ~~A~~He that was dead sat up and began to speak. Thus we learn talking is a sign of life.

This was indelibly impressed upon me while I was a student in seminary. One of the many different jobs I had to pay my way through school was as a delivery boy for a florist. I'll never forget my first delivery to a mortuary. I took the bouquet to the reception desk and asked where to put it. I was told to set it beside the casket in the third slumber room on my left. ~~A~~What do I do with this

boutonniere?@ I asked. The lady smiled and answered, APut it on the man=s lapel.@

I gulped -- I hadn=t been around any dead people before -- and cautiously made my way down the hall, opened the third door to my left and stepped inside. Sure enough, there was a man lying in a casket. I placed the floral display beside the casket, took a deep breath, leaned over the casket to place the boutonniere on the man=s lapel. As I did so, he opened his eyes and said, AT~~hanks~~ bud!@

I nearly died! Later, I learned that one of my Afriends@back at the florist shop had phoned ahead, explained I was a new driver and asked that I be given the Afull treatment.@ After I got over the initial shock and began to think about it, I wondered why I had been so scared. And it hit me: ADead men don=t talk!@

Talking is a sign of life. It is one of the marks that distinguishes a live person from one that is dead. Likewise, one of the signs of spiritual life is the ability -- and I might add, the *desire* -- to talk about the things of Christ. An unsaved person can=t do that. And furthermore, even if he could he wouldn=t, because he has no desire to talk about the things of God. He=s spiritually dead.

Christian witnessing is a sign of life. Notice I said Christian witnessing. My good friend Paul Kopp says, AWhen we emphasize what we believe we divide the body of Christ and lose the world. When we emphasize Who we believe we unite the body of Christ and save the world.@ A lot of people are happy to talk about their church and its peculiarities, but they neglect to speak of the precious personage of Christ who is Lord of the Church.

Dr. James B. Chapman illustrates the folly of such witnessing with this story. He says that during the Civil War, the Federalists were stationed on one side of a creek and the Confederates on the other. While the men were waiting for orders, there was a lull in the fighting, but the bands continued to play. The Federal band played, AT~~he~~ Star Spangled Banner,@ and the Confederates answered with ADixie.@ The Federal band played another national song which was promptly answered with a southern favorite.

Finally, one of the bands began the strains of ~~A~~Home, Sweet, Home@ and immediately the other band joined in. As the sweet music rang out over the dark battlefield something wonderful happened. Fathers from both North and South thought of their babies at home. Husbands thought of faithful, waiting wives. Sons thought of mothers. Brothers thought of sisters. Lovers thought of sweethearts. Soon all of them had forgotten the ~~A~~enemy.@ Hats were tossed in the air. Cheeks were stained with tears. And choking voices raised a cheer for ~~A~~Home, Sweet, Home.@

Do you get the point? You can witness to the peculiarities of your particular denomination and all you'll do is antagonize someone from some other group. But if you talk Christ -- if you tell the gospel of Christ's love and Christ's grace and Christ's life -- if you cry out, ~~A~~All hail the power of Jesus name!@then Methodists and Presbyterians and Lutherans and Baptists and all the rest will join you in singing his praises. All of our denominational differences and personal peculiarities pale into insignificance as we gather at the feet of King Jesus!

Oh, beloved, the need for Christian witnessing is great. Look at the figures: one billion human beings are without the gospel. 40 million die every year. 100,000 die every day. Four die every time we breathe. The vast majority of these are dying in sin. Hopelessly entangled in the snare of Satan, they are sinking into hell. There is only one thing that can help them. One power that can save them. One person that can free them from the grasp satan has upon their souls. That one thing is the gospel. That one power is the Holy Spirit. That one person is Jesus Christ.

And if you are to be true to your calling, if you want to display real evidence of being born again, if you desire to bear the fruit of one who is spiritually alive, then you will fulfill your responsibility and measure up to your task. You will do the job Christians are called to do. You will take this gospel of the crucified, risen Son of God, to a lost and dying world.

How can you do that? How can you talk for Christ? You can do it personally by the quality of your every day living. When Lucille and I were in Boros, Sweden, we stayed in the lovely home

of a man named Joe Svelander. One day Joe and I were chatting and I asked him, **A**What is your business?**@** He replied, **A**I am a Christian.**@** I thought he had misunderstood me and remembering Swedes often call their business their **A**ffair**@** I said, **A**No Joe, I was talking about your affair. Your main concern. Your daily work.**@** He smiled. **A**I understood you, Johnnie. **I****m** a Christian. **T****a****t****s** my affair. **T****a****t****s** my main concern. I sell Ford automobiles to pay the expenses.**@**

My Swedish friend had it right. **T****a****t****s** being a Christian. **T****a****t****s** bearing the right kind of fruit. It is, as the poet put it:

APayng a visit to sorrow=**s** abode,
Helpng a burdened one o=er a rough road;
This the sweet thought making duty delight,
Turning the shadows of gloom into light --
Just to please Jesus.

Giving a smile or taking a hand,
Leading lost feet to the far Better Land;
Doing and thinking and hearing and seeing,
Eating and drinking and waking and being --
Just to please Jesus.

Not only can you talk for Jesus personally, but you can also do it by proxy. You mothers and fathers can give your sons and daughters to the task of winning souls for the Savior. Would to God we had more parents like the Moravian mother who, after giving a son to missions was approached by a sad faced friend who said, **A**Your son is gone!**@**

That dear woman said, **A**Is my son Thomas gone to heaven through the missionary life?**@** The messenger nodded. **A**Then,**@**she said, **A**would to God he would call my next son, John.**@** John was called and went and also died. When a committee came bearing the tragic news to this faithful mother, instead of tears of bitterness she exclaimed, **A**Praise God! Would he would call my last

son, William. @ Her prayer was answered. William went and also fell on the battlefield of Christian missions. But even then, in the face of such tremendous sacrifice, that precious saint of God was undaunted, and she exclaimed, **¶**Oh that I had a thousand sons to give to Jesus Christ. @

And may I say to you parents here tonight, there is no higher calling to which you can give your sons and daughters than the task of proclaiming the unspeakable riches of Jesus Christ to those who have never heard.

Not only can you talk for God personally and by proxy, you can also do so through the giving of your possessions.

Someone has said, **¶**A man's pocketbook is the most sensitive nerve in his body. @ It's no wonder then, that Christ paid so much attention to the subject of money. Over one-third of his parables and one-sixth of the Gospels deal with people and their possessions in relationship to God. Why? Because pride in possessions and the love of money has caused more wars, more suicides, more broken homes and bleeding hearts than any other thing.

There is no evil in money itself. The inanimate object contains no measure of sin. It's the *love* of money that is the cancer of the soul. The danger lies in the purpose for which it is gained and the use to which it is put. And how America has prostituted this most effective instrument, this resource, which could be of such tremendous value in the work of the Kingdom of God.

Recent figures show that during the span of one-year, Americans spent 25 percent more for jewelry. 41 percent more theaters. 48 percent more for cigarettes. 203 percent for automobiles. 20 percent for whiskey. 317 percent more for beer.

While on the other side of the ledger they gave 30 percent less to churches. 29 percent less to charity. 24 percent less to the Community Chest. 18 percent less to schools and colleges.

Think of it! Dollars for sin, but dimes for souls. Millions for mischief, but mites for missions. Fabulous fortunes for lust and greed and lasciviousness, but a few paltry pennies to tell lost souls of a loving Savior. Some people say America is a Christian nation. But God knows that's a lie. Her values betray her. For my Bible says, **A**Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.**@** And I ask you: Where is your treasure? To what purpose are you putting your possessions? If you have shirked your responsibility in this area, I say:

AOh Zion, haste, thy mission high fulfilling,
To tell to all the world that God is light.
That he who made all nations is not willing
One soul should perish, lost in shades of night.

Behold how many thousands still are lying,
Bound in the dark some prison house of sin,
With none to tell them of the Savior's dying,
Or of the life he died for them to win.

Give of thy sons to bear the message glorious.
Give of thy wealth to speed them on their way.
Pour out thy soul for them in prayer victorious,
And all thou spendest, Jesus will repay.**@**

Talking is a sign of life. How do you rate yourself?

WALKING

The third distinguishing mark Jesus emphasized as a sign of life is found in the story of the raising of Lazarus. In John 11 we're told that Jesus cried with a loud voice, **A**Lazarus, come forth.**@** And verse 44 explains, **A**He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot in grave clothes . . . and Jesus said, **A**Loose him and let him go.**=@** So, walking is also a sign of life.

I don't believe there is a more effective way you can show forth your Christian conversion than

through a godly, saintly, Christian walk. Without a doubt, there is no greater argument for Christianity and the claims of Christ than a changed life

I'm sure most of you have read the New Testament story of the demoniac in the tomb. He was a wretched fellow. His wild shrieks and frenzied actions terrified the people around him. But Jesus came and commanded the evil spirits to leave him. Instantly the troubled man was free. And we are told he arose and went into the city showing forth the change Jesus had brought about. And the Bible says, **AThe people marveled.**@

Christmas Evans, a great Welsh preacher of an earlier generation, imagines how it must have been when he drew near his home. Evans imagines the children looking out a window and seeing a man coming up the road. **AMother, they cry, Afather's coming.**@ The mother hurries to the window, looks out, runs to the door and locks it. **AChildren, keep still, your father is a maniac.**@

But the children, peeking through the curtain say, **ADon't worry, mother, it's not father. Father used to come bounding up the way. This man is walking. Father used to come home shrieking. This man comes quietly.**@ But the mother says, **AKeeep still! It might be your father.**@

You can almost hear their hearts beating when they hear footsteps on the porch and see the door latch turn. But it's locked. Then there's a gentle rapping on the door. And she hears a soft voice she hasn't heard in years. It was the voice she heard when he asked her to be his bride. It was the voice he used when their first child was born. **AMary, please open the door. I've met Jesus.**@ Christmas Evans says she sprang to the door, threw it open and when he came in he brought heaven with him.

Beloved, this is not a fairy tale. This is real life. Change always occurs when we meet Jesus. It's not enough to come down the aisle. It is not enough to take the preacher by the hand. It is not enough to join the church and give your money. There must be a change in your walk.

Gypsy Smith used to say things would really happen if all the churches in the land would close down for a year and the people were sent out to serve instead of invited in to sit. I believe he was right. We will either serve or stagnate. We will either evangelize or fossilize.

In one of his sermons, J. Wilbur Chapman told an instructive story. Paganini, the great violinist, was seized as a suspect and put in prison. To taunt him, his jailers gave him a violin with only one string. But by persistent practice, he acquired an execution so masterful he was able to play on *one* string more beautifully than other violinists could upon four strings.

When Paganini died his violin was taken to Genoa, Italy, where it was placed in a glass case. Over time, it was discovered the wood was beginning to rot. It appeared the violin would not last much longer. Leading scientists were asked the best means of preserving this national treasure. After extensive research, the scientists decided the instrument needed to be used, and henceforth it was to be taken out of the glass case several times a year and played by a gifted violinist. The wood would feel the vibrations generated by the music of a master and the decay would be arrested.

My sermon is finished. In a few moments we will go out into the night. But before we leave this sanctuary, permit me to pose that question one more time. Are there these three signs of life evident in your life? If not, I urge you to meet me here at the altar. Confess your sins. Claim Jesus as your personal Savior and go out into the night rejoicing in the assurance of your salvation.

Perhaps you will say, **AS**Yes, Johnnie. I've accepted Jesus as my personal Savior. I know I've been born-again.**@** Then let me put it another way. Are you a Christian? Have you been living the life? Have you been talking the talk? Have you been walking the walk? Or do your eating, talking and walking habits betray you? If you've faltered at one place or another, come tonight and rededicate your heart to Christ, so from this moment forward your life will be a lighthouse, guiding poor, lost sinners to a gracious and loving God. The way will not always be easy. But the rewards are great.

High in the Swiss Alps there**s** a monument erected to the memory of a guide who perished while

attempting to lead a group of mountain climbers up a treacherous cliff. The simple inscription carved on the stone is as great a compliment as could be paid to anyone. It reads, **A**He Died Climbing.**@** A noble tribute to a heroic man. He perished in the line of duty. His face was forward. His destination up.

May you so live that when you face your God and your Christ, your record might read, **A**He perished in the line of duty. His face was forward. His destination up. He died climbing!**@**