

THE PERIL OF BECOMING A CHRISTIAN@

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Lk. 11:24-26

This passage of scripture, which is commonly called **A**the parable of the empty house,**@** addresses itself to the most perplexing problem facing the church today. It is the problem of defeated Christians. There is no better description of the tragedy of neglect given in the scripture than that which is given here. For these three verses relate in rapid succession the auspicious beginning of the person who has become a Christian, and the awful consequences which befall that person who fails to grow from this beginning, into a mature Christian.

In all of human experience I believe that one of the greatest, most heartbreaking, most tormenting tragedies that can come into a family is the tragedy which denies a mother the privilege of holding her newborn baby in her arms. What greater calamity than this, that, after a woman has gone through the travail, the agony, the pain, the loneliness of that journey into the valley of the shadow of death to bear her child, only to hear those terrible words which cause hot tears to course down her cheeks, **A**Born dead. There was no life. The baby was born dead.**@**

Can there be any greater tragedy? None, save this, that, after a child is born, if it lives, it fails to grow. It's a blessed day when a baby comes into a home. But, if that baby does not grow into healthy maturity, the joy of his or her arrival is soon eclipsed by the sadness of arrested development.

Several months ago I visited the Sonoma State Hospital. There I saw some of the most pathetic sights I have ever seen. There was one little girl lying helplessly in a crib. To a casual observer she was a child. But I learned to my dismay, she was approaching adolescence.

There was another child, a boy, the doctor said, though it was hard to tell from outward appearances. His body was twisted and deformed and his head was more than twice the size of

his body. A hydrocephalic I believe the doctor said. But most certainly, a sight to make the angels weep.

Out in the garden there were men working. I *say* they were men, and they *were* in physical stature and years, but in mind they were babies. They had failed to grow up mentally.

As I rode home that evening with my friend, Dr. Ralph Knudsen, Professor of Old Testament at the seminary where I took my training, I commented on the awful tragedy of the things we had seen. He was silent for a long time. We must have driven ten or fifteen miles and not a word was said. And then he answered, AYes, Johnnie, but there is still a sadder sight.@

I searched his face in an effort to discover what he meant. Then he added, AIt@s become so common it arouses little attention and even less interest. It@s the problem of the undeveloped soul. The Christian upon whom spiritual infantilism has laid its hand, so the character which was promised in the hour of conversion fails to materialize.@

Oh beloved, listen! The church has become a spiritual incubator to keep unnatural spiritual births alive. Instead of being busy at the business of winning the lost, the church has been given over to the discouraging task of spoon-feeding a horde of defeated Christians who are suffering from spiritual infantilism. Men and women who were born into the newness of life, but who, by reason of their neglect, have remained empty. They failed to grow. They failed to come of age spiritually speaking. Instead of being, Athe salt of the earth@they are a curse to Christianity. Instead of being Athe light of the world,@they are stumbling stones in the way of sinners. Instead of being the glory of Christ, they are his heartache and his shame.

This is the church@s most perplexing problem, and Jesus addressed himself to it when he spoke this parable.

In studying these three verses we discovered two tremendous truths. First of all --

The Transcendency of the New Birth.

We are told (in verses 43 and 44) the unclean spirit was gone out of the man. It searched for a place to go, and finding none returned to his old abode and found it: ¶swept and clean.¶ In other words, this man was a trophy of the cleansing power of Jesus=blood. He had been born again. He had been saved. He had experienced the miracle of salvation in his own heart and life. He was clean. His sin was gone.

Salvation from sin is a marvelous thing. Its many facets reflect the majesty and might of God=s love as it radiates from the throne of grace. I marvel continuously at its splendor, for the new birth is glorious in many ways. It is --

Glorious in its Forgiveness of Sin.

Anyone who has ever come to the Savior and experienced the cleansing which occurs when we place our sins under the blood of Jesus knows what the hymn writer meant when, in the second verse of my favorite hymn we find these precious words:

¶My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul.¶

Indeed, the new birth is glorious in its forgiveness of sin. Then, too, the new birth is --

Glorious in its Giving of Eternal Life.

They say young preachers don=t preach about heaven. If so, I=m the exception, for heaven is my favorite subject. My heart leaps for joy at the thought of eternal life in the mansions of glory in the presence of our King.

Indeed, this is a gracious gospel and the promise of eternal life is a glorious thought. No wonder we sing,

¶Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now I'm found,
Was blind but now I see.¶

And praise God for that last verse:

¶When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
There are no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.¶

But not only is the new birth great because of the quantity of life it offers, it is also --

Glorious Because of the Quality of Life it Offers.

I will never forget Dr. Bob Moyer's story of how, one day, as he was riding on a train between speaking engagements, he noticed a young man acting strangely. He would run his hand over the plush-lined seats and as he did, he kept saying, ¶Wonderful. Wonderful.¶ Then he would stare out of the window at the passing countryside and, as he did so he kept saying, ¶Wonderful.

Wonderful.¶ He picked up a newspaper, fingered it gingerly and said, ¶Wonderful. Wonderful.¶ He walked up and down the Pullman car examining every detail, all the time repeating one word, ¶Wonderful. Wonderful.¶

Finally, Dr. Moyer, overcome with interest left his seat and sat down beside the young man. ¶I hope you're not offended,¶ he said, ¶but tell me, why do you keep repeating the word ¶Wonderful?¶ Do you feel well? Are you all right?¶ The young man smiled broadly and said, ¶I guess I do appear to be acting strangely, but up until today I was blind. Several months ago they began a series of operations on my eyes. Today they removed the last bandage and, for the first time in my life, I can see. Look there! See that little stream and old rail fence? Isn't it wonderful? And look! There's a farmer with a team of horses. Isn't it wonderful?¶

Dr. Moyer describes how, as the train slowed for the next station he went back to his seat. The young man gathered up his baggage and, as the train came to a stop, took one last look around and said, ¶Wonderful. Wonderful.¶

Moyer continues --

¶I watched him as he alighted from the train. I saw a lovely young lady wave at him tentatively, and then, when he waved back, run into his arms. I watched them embrace for one long moment, and then I saw him push her out to arms length, hold her there as he looked at her for the first time. Then I saw his lips move, and they whispered, >Wonderful. Wonderful.=

¶The train began to move, but somehow all else was blotted out by the sight of that young man as he beheld his sweetheart for the first time. Throughout the balance of the day as I sat looking out the window, and through the night as I lay in my berth, it seemed as though the wheels of the train were singing as they clicked over the rails, and the word they sang was >Won-der-ful. Won-der-ful. Won-der-ful. Won-der-ful. Won-der-ful.=@

Truly, this is a wonderful salvation. It surpasses our finite understanding. It is glorious in its manifold manifestations. Blinded eyes are open. Sin-stained hearts are cleansed. Broken lives are healed. There is new peace. A new power for today. A new promise of eternal life tomorrow. Thanks be to God for such a precious gospel, such a glorious hope, such a regal Savior. Saved by the blood of the Lamb. ¶Swept and clean.=@

Oh how I wish I could stop there. How I wish Christ had stopped there. How I hate to go on. How I wish men and women would not only behold the transcendence of the new birth, but glory in it. Glow in it. Grow in it. How I wish I could pronounce the benediction and I could still be true to our text. But I can't! God knows how I hate to go on, but on my honor as a minister, I must tell you of --

The Tragedy of Neglect.

Our text reveals that when the unclean spirit came back to his old abode he not only found it ¶swept and clean.= But, tragedy of tragedies, he found it ¶empty.= So he went and got ¶seven other spirits more wicked than he and they entered the man and dwelt there.= Verse forty-five

says, ¶The last state of that man was worse than the first.¶

Someone has said the most unhappy person in the world is a Christian who is living outside the will of God. Why? I'll tell you. He knows what he's missing. He knows the indescribable joy of walking close to God. He knows the perfect peace and contentment found in prayer and fellowship with Christ. He knows the thrill of having prayers answered and seeing souls saved.

He knows all this. He also knows the wretchedness of his present state and that fact, coupled with the knowledge of what could have been and should have been, makes him almost unbearable to live with. That's the peril of becoming a Christian! That, one who having been saved, remains empty, and failing to grow, returns to a state worse than before.

I believe that there are three steps in this falling away from Christ. The first is --

Preoccupation.

Preoccupation with the things of the world. I remember hearing the story of a hunter who had purchased a new hunting dog. Early on opening day of hunting season his dog picked up the trail of a deer. Shortly thereafter, a fox crossed the trail of the deer and the dog took after the fox. A little later, a rabbit crossed the trail of the fox and the dog took after the rabbit. Still a little later, a squirrel crossed the trail of the rabbit and the dog took after the squirrel. When the hunter finally caught up with his dog, he found it barking triumphantly at the hole of a field mouse.

What a picture of many Christians. Such a fine beginning, but such a tragic end. They are diverted by this attraction and that, until at last, they are preoccupied with mere trivialities. That's the trouble with the church today. There are too many Christians who are occupied with trifling things instead of eternal questions. There are farmers who have given themselves over so completely to the farm they have neglected their church, and *now* they no longer own their farm, their farm owns them. There are businessmen so engrossed in making money they have shoved Christ into a back corner of their lives, and instead of running their business, their business runs

them.

There are fathers, husbands, mothers, wives, who have become so preoccupied with the helter-skelter schedule of home and office they have crowded out their family altar. In place of Bible study and prayer, there is the morning news broadcast. In place of personal and family devotions there is the gardening, the soap opera, the newspaper, the shopping, the bridge club, the dog and a thousand other trivialities.

There are young people who are preoccupied with the pursuit of pleasure. Under the guise of innocent fun, passions God intended to be holy and pure have been unleashed into hands which could not control them, and soon these young people discover they do not rule their passions, their passions rule them. Preoccupation is a deadly thing. It is so subtle. It appears so insignificant. And yet it is so powerful. Preoccupation deadens the sensitivities, it numbs the conscience, and soon the faltering Christian is taking the second step --

Indifference.

Indifference to the things of God. It is unbelievable, but true, that there are those who have grown cold and indifferent to the love of God. It might be understandable for an unsaved person to feel that way, but for a Christian to become indifferent to the things of God, seems impossible. And yet, our churches are full of them.

Their names are on the roll. Somewhere, back yonder, they came down the aisle of some church and made a profession of faith. For a while they ran true, worked at the job, served the Lord, practiced prayer, read the Bible, attended the services of the church. Then they fell by the way. Through preoccupation with the things of the world, they became indifferent to the things of God.

There is a scripture in I Corinthians which describes the plight awaiting those who fall away from God. Paul says that, at the judgment seat of Christ, every Christian=s works will be tested by the

fire of God=s love to determine their value. I Corinthians 3:14 explains that if a man=s work survives the fire of God=s judgment, he will receive a reward. Verse 15 goes on to say, and hear this, beloved, **If any man=s works shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; as by fire.**@

Do you see it, beloved? Saved? Yes! Saved as by fire. Left empty-handed. The Bible says many Christians will get into heaven as Lot got out of Sodom. Burned out. That=s the curse, the scourge, the price of indifference. It leaves you empty-handed. But there is still another step which grows out of indifference and that is --

Wilful Rejection of God=s Will for Your Life.

The way some Christians act it would seem they think that *now*, because they are born-again, it does not matter how they live. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rejection of the will of God will not go unjudged. We have been bought with a price and we belong to the buyer!

There is a great group of people today whom we call Sunday Christians. They are like the man in our text. They have all the garnishments, all the exterior appearances of a Christian, but they are empty. They go to church on Sunday, toss a few shekels into the offering plate, listen to the preacher proclaim God=s message of their lives, and then they go out and live like the devil the rest of the week. Because of their open, wilful rejection of God=s will for their lives, they have lost their moral and spiritual equilibrium.

And, hear me! God will not let them go unpunished. You can=t be pious on Sunday and get drunk on Monday. You can=t speak of brotherly love and hate your neighbor. You can=t claim to be honest and get into shady deals. You can=t give liberally to the church on the Lord=s day and then work people for less than a living wage the rest of the week. You can=t claim to be humble and play the snob. You can=t plead for unity and then do everything you can to divide the body of Christ. You can=t go on and on and on in disobedience to God and expect to go scot-free. **Be not deceived, beloved, God is not mocked, whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.**@

There will come a day when you will reckon with God for every selfish act, every opportunity for service shrugged aside, every obligation to follow God's precepts laughed off, every call into full-time obedience refused.

Disobedience demands punishment and there will come a day when every Christian will be judged according to his works. Oh child of God, if you have fallen away from God by reason of preoccupation or indifference or willful rebellion, I beseech you: Forsake your sinful ways. Confess your shortcomings. Return now, in humility, to your God.

It's not too late. His grace is sufficient for thee. Christ is anxious to receive you. He longs to empower you to live a victorious life. And, he will if you only let him. Praise God, ¶We are more than conquerors through him that loved us.¶

And then let me tell you of --

The Triumphs of a Fully Surrendered Life.

There are three prerequisites to victory in your Christian life. The first of these is --

The Unconditional Surrender of Your Want to God's Will.

That was Paul's secret. For Paul, Christ was all in all. Christ was the author of his life. The sustainer of his life. The product of his life. The crown of his life. To Paul, Christ was the Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end. Whether Paul looked back at the past, the present, or the future -- within, without, behind, above, or beyond the consummation -- all Paul saw was Jesus! ¶For me to live as Christ,¶he said, ¶and to die is gain.¶ The second prerequisite is --

The Development of Positive Growth Practices.

I used to wonder why, on occasion, when I preached there was absolutely no power. I learned the reason from an old minister friend of mine. One day I asked him why it was that sometimes when I preached, there was a great outpouring of blessing and, at other times, there was a veritable famine. He said, ¶John, have you ever tried to breathe out three times while only

breathing in once?@ ANo. @ ATry it. @ I did and found it was impossible. AIt can't be done, @ I said. He nodded and smiled. AThere's your answer. @

Beloved, you can't keep giving out if you don't make time to take in. Prayer is the Christian's main source of power and you are *always* to pray. You ought to pray when you feel like it, for it would be a sin to miss such an opportunity. And you ought to pray when you don't feel like it, for it's dangerous to be in such a state.

You must also study God's written word. If you want a strong body, you must maintain a healthy diet. If you want a strong soul, you must feed it on the bread of life. It's not enough to browse through a chapter here and there. You must become immersed in scripture. You must study it. Probe it. Pray over it. Listen to it. It's not so important how many times you have been through the Bible. The real question is, AHow many times has the Bible been through you?@

And, you must give yourself away in a ministry to and for the cause of Christ. I'm not talking about full time service as a way to make a living. I'm talking about full time devotion as a way to make a life. I dare you to do that. I dare you to surrender your won't to God's will. I dare you to develop faithful habits of prayer and Bible study. I dare you to give yourself away in full time devotion to the way of Christ. The third prerequisite for victorious Christian living is --

Absolute Dependence on God.

When I was a little boy, I had a great fear of high places. One day, when I was about seven or eight years old, my father was putting a new roof on our house. It was quite warm and after awhile he asked me to bring him a drink of water. I went indoors, got a glass, filled it full of cool, refreshing water, took it outside and started up the ladder to deliver the water to my dad.

About halfway up I made the mistake of looking down. Although I was only a few feet off the ground, I was overcome by a paralyzing fear. I couldn't move. My father, who was watching, saw my plight and called out to me, ALook up, son. You'll be all right if you just look up. @ Oh, how hard it was for me to take my eyes off of my perilous plight. But, when I finally looked up, I saw a

smile of reassurance in my father=s face and I knew I=d be all right.

You get the point. There are many trying experiences ahead, and if you try to meet them in your own strength, you are likely to fall. But, if you trust in God and fix your eyes on him, you=l see a great big smile of reassurance in your heavenly Father=s face and you=l be all right if you just look up!