

**BEYOND DECENCY**  
Dr. John Allan Lavender  
Jn. 3:1-7

According to the latest census, there are now more than 170 million people in the United States. Of these 170 million, 140 million are members of some church. In recent years, the growth of the church has exceeded the increase in population. Apparently then, there is no immediate danger of a widespread collapse of the religious life of America.

Also, it would seem from a quick perusal of these figures, that 60% of our people are religious and 40% are pagans. But this is much too crude and simple a statement of the situation. Even the church itself would not claim that all its members are religious and all persons outside it are irreligious. In fact, only God knows who does and who does not belong to the true church, which is the body of Christ. And I suppose heaven will have no greater surprise to offer, than the discovery of who is in heaven and who is not.

Each of us is aware, I am sure, that in every age there are a few passionately religious persons, and over against them a few equally passionate irreligious persons. However, the great majority of people who eat, drink, marry and are given in marriage, live in a kind of vacillating, lukewarm midworld between the two extremes. Certainly this is true of the world in which we live today.

Now the passionately religious people need no help. They are sure of their position and of themselves. The passionately irreligious people are unwilling to discuss the matter at all and are immune to any tentative arguments of religion. Therefore, our task is to reach, in whatever way we can, that vast middle group of decent, law-abiding, moral people, with the message that there is something for them beyond decency. That, beyond reformation lies an experience of faith that reveals the deeper meaning of life.

There are two points I would like to make this morning and you can note them down if you like.

First of all, I want to discuss what I call the narcotic of upper middle class decency, and then, the necessity of a new life instead of a new leaf.

### **The Narcotic of Upper Middle Class Decency**

The primary danger of what I have called upper middle class decency,<sup>2</sup> is that it confuses outward reformation with inward transformation. Social decency with spiritual reality. Every decent, respectable citizen is revolted and repulsed by the gross and fleshy sins of the moral degenerate. No one in his right mind wants to be associated either directly or indirectly with the social delinquents.

Furthermore, we have learned it pays to be good. Even though we glamorize the bad, and run blazing headlines when a minister runs off with another man's wife, we ignore the hundreds of simple souls who live Christlike lives. Even though we often times are attracted by the thrill of doing something that is just a little shady, we all know that in the long run, the man who is honest in his business dealings, the youth who lives up to his highest moral ideals, the woman who is faithful to her husband, and the husband who is loyal to his wife, are the happy ones. They are free from the scourge of a nagging conscience. They can look life in the face and be unafraid. They can pillow their head at the close of the day and sleep in peace. It's an undeniable fact, that it pays to be good.

So we make every honest effort to be good. We join the right clubs. We associate with the right people. We live in the right neighborhood. We belong to the right church (which is Morgan Park Baptist, of course). We become in every sense of the word, *respectable*. We are proud of our decency, and it is this pride which is our downfall, for it contributes to a self-satisfaction which denies the need of divine forgiveness.

### **Going Deeper With Christ**

Just because we are not guilty of some of the so-called major sins and thus are apparently free from the stern accusations of God's moral law, it does not mean we do not need to repent and

receive God's forgiveness. It is simply because we *are* decent and respectable that we need to beware of the temptation of falling into a greater sin, the sin of complacency which is the most insidious form of pride.

There is not one of us here this morning who has not met the man who is proud of his morality. Who feels there is something noteworthy about being better than the worst person he knows. Who, like little Jack Horner, goes blissfully about, holding his self-righteous thumb in the air saying "What a good boy am I!" Unfortunately, this man is not really in touch with himself, and his folly is great!

There is too much evil in every one of us, too many inclinations to weakness, too many bents toward selfishness in all of us, for any of us to brag about his goodness. "The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." And Solomon was speaking with more than the wisdom of men when he said, "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool!"

Some years ago a remarkable picture was exhibited in London. As you looked at it from a distance, you seemed to see a monk engaged in prayer, his hands clasped, his head bowed. As you came nearer, however, and examined the painting more closely, you saw that in reality he was squeezing a lemon into a punch bowl!

What a picture of many church members that is! Superficially examined, he seems to be the epitome of all that is good. Whereas in reality, his very pretense at goodness is the epitome of all that is bad. For pride is still the fundamental sin. It was through pride that the devil became the devil. It was through pride that Adam sinned. And it is through pride that countless regiments of the respectable are lost, for it creates a spiritual complacency that finally damns the soul.

How many people today have any real sense of sin? To most folks, it is like believing in elves and pixies. All right for a less educated generation, but surely not in keeping with our advanced and enlightened age. Sin has lost its horror. We forget that for Jesus, it meant a cross. We

forget sin is not a dead article in some creed, but is alive, and growing, and hellbent upon the soul's destruction.

We fail to see the true nature of this monster that appears so innocent and is so deadly. And through our complacency we fall prey to its tug and lure. In the words of Alexander Pope:

ASin is a monster of so frightful mien,  
As to be hated, needs but to be seen;  
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,  
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.®

Dr. Charles Templeton, who is the evangelist for the National Council of Churches, and one of the most gifted preachers living today, tells the story of a man who, while on a tour of Africa, acquired a baby python for a pet. He pampered and petted the snake, making many personal sacrifices to keep the snake alive during the long ocean voyage.

When he returned home, he delighted in taking the python out of its cage, and to the wild screams of his friends, allow it to gently curl about his neck and shoulders. Always, when the snake would begin to tighten its coils, the man would reach up and pull the snake loose and with a laugh of triumph toss it back into its cage.

As the years passed, the man and his snake became quite famous. One day, at the urging of his friends, he lifted the pet out of the cage and set it on his shoulders. The python began to twist his body in a series of coils about his neck. As the coils began to tighten, the man did what he had done 1,000 times before. He reached up to pull the snake away, but this time the snake resisted. As the death grip grew tighter, the strength of the man diminished, and by the time his friends came to realize that the gurgling cries for help were not part of the act, the man was dead.

What had happened? The man had pulled the snake off 1,000 times. Why did he fail this time? He forgot one thing. He forgot the snake was growing!

Such is the deadly nature of sin. It is not some static thing, frozen and immovable. It is real. It is alive, and it is growing. And for that reason, we cannot long neglect it. A man does not need to shoot himself in order to commit suicide. He need only neglect the necessary sustenance of life and he will die of malnutrition.

Likewise, a man need not be guilty of the gross and fleshy sins of South State Street for his soul to be lost. He need only neglect the way of life that lies beyond decency and respectability, for *this* is the narcotic of upper middle class decency. It confuses outward reformation with inward transformation. It contributes to a self-satisfaction that denies the need of divine forgiveness. It creates a spiritual complacency that finally damns the soul. How clear then becomes the necessity of something beyond decency, the necessity of --

### **A New Life Instead of a New Leaf**

Beyond decency lies genuine repentance. What is repentance? Simply put, it is taking God's side against our sin. What does *that* mean? Three things. First, in true repentance you have --

### **A Real Conviction of Sin**

There is a profound and deeply disturbing awareness of what sin has done to you, and what sin has done to God and good.

Let me show you what I mean. Suppose a man who is rather proud of his ability to knock off a quick little painting, discovers a piece of canvas fastened to a wall. For his own pleasure and the amusement of his friends, he rapidly paints in bright and gaudy colors, a little picture. Stepping back to see his work better, he suddenly discovers he has painted his little bit of nonsense on the corner of a vast painting of superb quality, so huge he had not realized its extent, or even that there was a painting there at all.

His feelings are, or should be, but a fraction of that emotion of disgrace which comes to the person who suddenly sees the vast sweep of God's design in life, and observes the cheap and

discordant little marks his sin has made upon it. And when you become aware of what sin has done to God, you are at least at the beginning of a real repentance. Second, in true repentance --

### **There Is An About Face**

There is an action on your part. In the story of the prodigal son, we read that Awhen he came to himself,@ that is, when he came to a real conviction of his desperate need he said, AI will arise and go.@ He had no time for pomp and pretense. No thought of self-improvement. It was Aarise and go!@

Every moment you stay away from God in order to get better, you are just adding to your sin. Your real sin is not doing this, or not doing that. Real sin is being away from God in the first place. All attempts at reformation without transformation are like the efforts of a thief who decides to tidy up his stolen goods before turning them over to police. His real duty is not to stack them up orderly, but to return them promptly.

So the second ingredient in true repentance is that you express it by an act of your will. An act which refocuses and redirects your life away from sin and self-indulgence to God and holy living. Finally, in genuine repentance there is --

**Evidence Of Change**This provides outer tangible confirmation of an inner spiritual transformation. Jesus said, ALet your light so shine among men that *they may see your good works*, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.@

The value of light is not in its similarity to darkness, but in its *contrast* to darkness. It is through that difference in how you choose to live *after* coming to Christ, which is the *evidence* of change which, in turn, validates your new birth experience.

There is no more beautiful or dramatic story of this transformation, than in the life of St. Augustine. For many years, he had been plagued by temptation. Sins of the flesh tore away at

his soul and he was in great despair. And then one day after hearing the great Ambrose preach, he fell into a deep conviction of sin. He felt as if he would burst if something was not done.

In his powerful literary work, Confessions, St. Augustine writes,

AI went out and sat in the garden under a fig tree, weeping bitterly at the awareness of my sin. When, suddenly, I heard the voice of a child saying, >Take and read. Take and read.= I arose, interpreting it to be the command of God to open the Book and read. I seized and opened and in silence read that section which my eyes first fell upon. >Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof!= No further did I need to read, for I simply knelt in prayer and the job was done.@

And what a job! New life had come! The glorious reality of a new life in Jesus Christ, for in that moment, the old Augustine died. In his place was born one made, not after the flesh, but of the Spirit, in the image of the Galilean. AOld things passed away and all things became new.@

The next day, it is said he walked down the streets of Milan head held high. One of his old friends with whom he had often sinned the sins of the flesh came up to him and plucked his sleeve. Augustine strode on. Again a pull on his sleeve, and the words, AAugustine, it is I@ AYes,@ he answered, Abut it is not I!@