

Good News America! 7-3-05

This morning I would like to share with you a message I adapted recently from Leith Anderson, the pastor of Wooddale Church in, you guessed it, Minnesota. I'm borrowing extensively from his sermon and adding a few points of my own.

The message is based on 1 Peter 2:9-12. ⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* ¹¹ *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.* ¹² *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* 1 Peter 2:9-12 (NIV)

We have what every person in the world desperately needs. Part of the path to fruitfulness, not only spiritual maturity but also seeing others come to Christ, must be found in the realization of this. If we are still searching for satisfaction, what do we have to share? If we are still clinging to our life, we have not yet found life. It is only when we have abandoned it and clung to our Savior as our only and total satisfaction that we truly find it. Then we have something to share. Then we watch for opportunities to share.

Many years ago, I went to dinner with a Japanese mafia leader to share Christ with him. He had so much money, he looked for opportunities to give out \$100 tips. Bill Gates looks for something to do with his immense wealth. We are by far wealthier than those men or any man. If you truly have Christ and He has you, you too will be watching for opportunities to do something with the wealth you have in Christ. I believe our inability to share is because of our lack of experiencing Jesus as the answer to our every need. We haven't realized the wealth we have at hand.

The early church certainly did, but it wasn't in the form of programs. Can you imagine reading in Scripture, "The Apostle came and preached unto us witnessing techniques for first century Jews in urban confines"? The reason it sounds so strange is that it was in living every day in the wealth they had in Christ that witnessing took place.

The Roman Empire was a hard place for a Christian. Because of the extreme differences in belief systems, Christians were often the brunt of periodic persecutions. Caligula dipped Christians in pitch and used them to light his gardens at night. Many were crucified and others thrown to lions because they refused to acknowledge Caesar as a god. Sure, their numbers got a kick-start with those mass conversions at Pentecost, but how, in the face of such persecution, did they end up taking over the Roman Empire in less than 300 years? They lived in the richness of their spiritual wealth. Here are just a few examples.

The Roman cities weren't very sanitary. Disease and plague often cleared out whole cities. When the people would flee, the Christians stayed to help the sick. When the people returned, their sick relative had recovered and become a Christian. Then he or she shared Christ with their family. That is practical Christianity. Jesus in those Christians manifested Himself through their lives.

The Romans were much like the Chinese today. They only wanted boys. A girl was considered a burden. That is why they practiced infanticide. They took their baby girl to the beach or the woods and left them there to die of exposure or by wild animals. What do you think a Christian would do if they came across one of these abandoned babies? Adopt! Well, you can see what would inevitably happen. Soon the Christians had the bulk of the women in society. If a young Roman man wanted to marry a Christian girl, the girl's family insisted on conversion first. The man had to demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit of God in his life before he could marry their daughter. This wasn't a program, or a plot, or even a campaign. It was just living out their life in Christ. It was Christ in them winning the needy.

When Rome would force slaves and others to populate a city, who taught them the language and trained them to get jobs? You're getting the point. It was the Christians. That was our brother Put's testimony. Who sponsored him and got him started in our country. Christians! Eventually Put yielded his life to Jesus because of the example he had seen of love and patience.

We hear of the Emperor Constantine and his dream to conquer in the name of Christ with the cross on their shields. We are told that was the reason that Rome became Christian. It is now believed that 56% of Rome had converted and Constantine had no other choice. Christians who gave up their rights to their own lives and died to self to live in Jesus, merely by living in Christ, had converted their neighbors. What does that say to us today?

We don't have as much need to meet physical necessities, but what if we adopt? What if we choose not to abort as unbelievers do? What if we care for a sick or disabled neighbor? What if we give English lessons to the immigrant? What if we live a life of love and gracious giving? When your neighbors are in need, do they know they can turn to you? Isolation is so common in our neighborhoods, a helpful loving neighbor will stand out in contrast.

If we will lose our lives for the sake of Jesus and live for Him and not for self, then people will see a difference. It is rarely in the debates and arguments that souls are turned. Yes, we need to be able to give an answer for the hope that lies in us. (1 Peter 3:15) But the real power to win a soul is the power of the Holy Spirit demonstrated in a life of love and joy and sacrificial service.

Are you living in the Spirit, with the joy of the Lord, looking for opportunities to share your abundant wealth, or not yet realizing the wealth that is yours in Christ? I encourage you to let go of the world and trying to satisfy yourself and find real wealth and real satisfaction in Christ. It isn't easy. It isn't always fun. But it is

Commented [notes1]: ¹⁵ But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:
1 Peter 3:15 (KJV)

fulfilling, exciting, and the right thing to do. It is certainly an adventure. It is the only life that promises 100 times in this life and the life to come. **Mark 10:30**

Last week we heard about Evangelism Explosion. It is a witnessing program in which you are prepared and mentored in going out into other's homes to share the Good News of what Christ has done for them. That is wonderful. It has been fruitful in many places. We have the Seed Sowing class here at Wayside. It is a class in which you discover ways to sow the seeds of the Gospel. These are ways in which we can fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, to go into all the world and make disciples of every nation. **(Matthew 28:19-20)** This message is not to detract from these programs in any way. I am saying that living the sacrificial Christian life overflowing with the Spirit should be the foundation of all our witnessing endeavors.

Is it working today? Why do we tend to focus on the negative, and why is it that the negative stories make the news? If I were to ask you if America was spiraling toward hell, or making spiritual progress, many of us view things as the former. We continually hear that things are getting worse and worse. Certainly sin abounds as it always has. It has taken a few new faces, like corporate corruption on a grand scale, internet pornography, anemic churches, drug availability and indiscriminant violence. But these are all just a reworking of the same ol' vices that nations of the world have always struggled with. As Solomon said, "There is no new thing under the sun." **(Ecclesiastes 1:10)**

Deism and secularism go back to the early days of our nation. Remember, at one time slavery was common in our country. You can find newspaper articles almost a hundred years ago that mentioned the laziness of youth, the drug abuse and sexual promiscuity. One hundred years ago, as much as half the population was stoned on Laudanum. Did you know you could order Heroine through Sears and Roebuck? Less than fifty years ago, theological liberalism dominated the religious landscape of America and born again believers were marginalized.

Today, however, people who claim to be born again include many of our top government officials, including our President and many on his staff, CEOs of some of the largest corporations, best selling authors like John Grisham, even U2s rock star Bono. There are numerous weekly Bible studies on Capital Hill. Did you realize there are fewer R rated films today than there were 10 years ago? One of the greatest selling R rated movies was the *Passion of the Christ*. You certainly can't say we are marginalized today. Well over 90 percent of Americans call themselves Christians, but you sure wouldn't get that impression from listening to the news.

Churches that believe and teach the Bible are the fastest growing, while liberal mainline churches are in decline. The largest and fastest growing churches in America today have a serious commitment to declaring the truth of the Bible and the authority of Jesus Christ. Best selling books have included *The Prayer of Jabez*, *Left Behind*, and *The Purpose Driven Life*. The attempt to take "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag was soundly defeated. Last week was Billy Graham's last crusade in New York, with an average of 100,000 there each night and thousands publicly committing their lives to Christ.

Commented [notes2]: ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields--and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. Mark 10:30 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ¹⁰ Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. Ecclesiastes 1:10 (NIV)

Even the secular press is complaining about the influence of Christianity upon the nation. A *New York Times* editorial complained that evangelical Christians are shaping U.S. foreign policy toward righteousness. We are so focused on our little liberal world of Sedona that we miss the big picture of what is happening in the world.

If this is a typical day in the People's Republic of China, there will be 32,000 new believers. South of the Sahara in Africa the same day will see 20,000 converts, while in South America another 10,000 come to Christ. That's 62,000 new Christians on those three areas alone. While many denominations once sent missionaries to 3rd world countries, they are beginning to send missionaries to us. In fact, some are saying that the next Christendom is beginning to arrive. They are predicting that future generations will look back at this time in which we are living as one of the greatest periods of Christian awakening!

The cynical among us might ask if this is genuine faith we are seeing. Why is it that we always look to detract from positive news but rarely look for the good in the negative news? One way we might determine if it is authentic faith is to see where these folks turn in a crisis. I'm sure you have noticed that in tragedy after tragedy the folks that are interviewed mention their faith in Jesus to see them through. When a child is found safe and sound, it is referred to as a miracle. You heard of the murderer who took a hostage in her own apartment and how she read him *The Purpose Driven Life* in the midst of that ordeal. It encouraged him to turn himself in.

Listen to the words of an unbelieving cynic, Justin Webb. He is the BBC correspondent in Washington DC, and this is what he wrote last year in regards to what he observed in America:

My wife and I do not believe in God. In our first posting in Brussels among the nominal Catholic Belgians' unbelief was not a problem. The Bush administration hums to the sound of prayer. Prayer meetings take place day and night. Before that in London it was not remotely an issue. With the sole exception of one friend who is an evangelical Christian, I don't recall a single conversation with anyone about religious matters in the years I lived and worked in the capital. Our house in London was right next to a church. We talked to the tiny congregation about the weather, about the need to prune the rosebushes and mend the fence, but we never talked about God. How different it is here on this side of the Atlantic. The early settlers came here in part to practice their faith as they saw fit. Since then the right to trumpet your religious affiliations loud and clear has been part of the warp and weft of American life. And I'm not talking about the Bible belt or about the loopy folk who live in Oregon and worry that the government is poisoning their water. I'm talking about Mr. and Mrs. Average in the normal town USA.

Mr. and Mrs. Average share an uncomplicated faith with roots in the Puritanism of the forbearers. According to that faith there is such a thing as heaven. Eighty-six percent of Americans, we are told by the pollsters, believe in heaven. But much more striking for me and much more pertinent in current world events is that 76 percent, or three out of four people you meet on any American street, believe in hell and the existence of Satan. They believe that the devil is out to get you, that evil is a force in the world, a force to be engaged in battle. Much of the battle takes place in the forms of prayer.

Americans will talk of praying as if it were the most normal, rational thing to do. The jolly, plump woman who delivers our mail in the Washington suburbs has a son who is ill. "The doctors are doing their best," she says, "but she's praying hard," and that is what will do the trick.

During the last week a child who has been missing for nine months has been found safe and well. The event was described routinely on the news media as a miracle. One broadcast had a caption reading, "the power of prayer." In fact, the child had been abducted and her abductor was recognized and captured. In rational, old Britain the media circus following the finding of the child would have focused on ways of preventing this from happening again, on police errors in the investigation. But here metaphorically, sometimes literally, they just sink to their knees.

They may be complaining, but it is music to our ears. We've heard so much from Mr. Barna about how we are no different from unbelievers in our lifestyle that we tend to overlook the affect of Christianity in our culture. When I was in India one of the biggest impressions I had was all the aid missions sponsored by American churches. Yes, Islam is growing rapidly, but Christianity is growing even faster.

Do we as a nation have plenty to repent of? Absolutely! We have a long way to go to be the shining example we should be to the world. I'm not saying we have not sinned and do not need renewal and revival. I am saying that things aren't as bad as we often paint it to be. There are signs of hope. We are beacon of hope for the world of Christian faith and generosity far surpassing any other nation. Let us continue to clean up our act and move forward as a nation with a Christian heritage, yet allows all to be free to worship as they choose.

Let us look again at the verse we opened this message with and see it as the witnessing program of the early church.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. ¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 1 Peter 2:9-12 (NIV)

Let's start a new witnessing program, holy lives, lives that sacrifice for those in need, lives that reach out in love to share Jesus' love. Oh, that isn't new is it? It is the oldest witnessing program in the Book, and I do mean The Book. It was Jesus who gave us this method in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, ¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* Matthew 5:14-16 (NIV) Let's live lives that invite people to Christ, lives overflowing with the Spirit of God, then our actions and our words will always invite people to know Jesus.