

(A Divine Visitation) Preparation - Part 2

by Richard Owen Roberts

This sermon emphasizes the necessity of preparation for divine visitation through repentance, addressing dead works, and ensuring our service is rooted in grace.

Duration: 59:02

Scripture: Isaiah 1:16-18, Isaiah 57:15, Matthew 6:33, Luke 3:7-14, Luke 3:17, John 2:23-25

Topics: "Repentance", "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the message of John the Baptist and the different groups of people who responded to his preaching. He emphasizes the importance of bringing forth fruits in keeping with repentance. The preacher also highlights the need for leaders to seek total deliverance from the need for human affirmation and to stick to the truth, even in a degenerate society. He concludes by urging the audience to serve God with grace rather than just relying on their gifts.

Transcript

And I thought of where I was, Oxford, in the heart of England, and all the mountains there, the mountains of doubt, the mountains of inordinate desire, the mountains of dead works. And it all became so vivid in my mind, in the question pressing on my heart, do you believe that I will move these mountains? And my heart was really rebelling. I was saying, Lord, we were having such a wonderful prayer meeting.

Why did you destroy my enjoyment of it by pressing these matters upon me? But still the question was there. And I finally said, why, Lord, it's no distance from Oxford to the sea. Yes, I certainly believe that these mountains, through prayer, will be moved into the sea.

And then the question became much more personal. How about Chicago and Wheaton? Do you believe I will move these mountains? And I gasped, Lord, it's a long ways. To the nearest ocean from Chicago, the question, do you believe? And finally, in faith, I said, yes, Lord, I believe.

And I did. And I do. But we're going to have to get to work and fill in what valleys we can and bring down what mountains we can, by the grace of God, level.

We've got to prepare the way of the Lord. And every crooked place or path shall become straight. Crooked doctrines, crooked practices, crooked relationships, crooked thinking, crooked self-appraisal.

And all the rough roads must be smoothed out. Our inconsistencies, our ups and downs, our highs, our lows, our openness, our closeness, our trusting, our suspicion, many of us are loaded with inconsistencies. A few days before coming down here, I finally got to that point in my reading of revival literature, when I laid hold of one of Edwin Orr's books, and hadn't read this one before, about the revival that began in 1790.

And there were some beautiful accounts in it. But somehow, in the midst of all this, he started to talk about a visit he made to Wheaton, Illinois, and that incredible stirring of the Holy Spirit in the 1950s. When Jim Elliott was so deeply moved, and when the other men who sacrificed their lives before the Alka Indians, and when a host of the world missionary leaders were students at Wheaton, God came in an incredible visitation.

But he gave an extract from the diary of Jim Elliott. Jim Elliott acknowledged that he hadn't been very careful about keeping a diary, but he had heard Edwin Orr talk about its importance, and about the importance of establishing a daily time, early in the morning, with the Lord. And so, in his diary, he wrote, I have been deeply moved to do this, and I'm going to do it with the greatest possible integrity.

And the first thing I must set down is the gross inconsistency that has accompanied my time with the Lord over the years. And now, by God's grace, I'm going to deal with that. And all who know his story know that, indeed, he did.

And God moved and blessed, wonderfully, every crooked way made straight, every high place brought down, every low place filled in, every rough road smoothed, and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God. Is that not what your heart beats toward? So, there's the quotation from Isaiah. There are two or three other things in terms of his message I want to draw to your attention.

Look at verses 7 and 8. He, therefore, began saying to the multitudes who were going out to be baptized by him, you brood of vipers. He'd, of course, recently read Carnegie's book on winning friends and influence. You brood of vipers.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bring forth fruit in keeping with your repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham for our father. For I say to you that God is able from the stone to raise up children to Abraham. How deeply do you concern yourself with fruits appropriate to your repentance? If one were to read this passage carelessly, they might gasp when they realize that multitudes were coming, and they might even envision these hypocrites that Jesus labeled scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites.

They were there. They were seeking baptism, it would appear. Long ago, when I was pondering that, I suddenly realized there was a passage in Luke that made it clear John didn't baptize those hypocrites.

And I felt tremendous relief. But some of you pastors have been busy baptizing scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites. Some time ago, I asked a pastor if he ever knowingly baptized an unconverted person, and he acknowledged that he had.

And I asked him how often. He's one of these mega church fellows, you know. And he said, well, I never counted, but I shouldn't think more than a thousand times why the average godly pastor doesn't baptize a thousand in a lifetime.

And here, this foolish young fellow admitted baptizing knowingly unconverted people. And when I asked him why, he said, you've got to understand, I've committed myself to build a mega church. Yes, and I said, you need to understand that the blood of every one of these people is on your hands, you hypocrite.

But I ask again, is there fruit in keeping with your repentance? And let's go beyond ourselves. Do you preach repentance? If you do, do you demand fruit appropriate to the repentant? How are we going to prepare the way of the Lord if we neglect repentance, or if we speak fervently of repentance and make no demands in terms of appropriate fruit? We had a wonderful lesson on that last night, did we not, out of 1 John chapter 1. But there's another issue here that I want you to look at in verse 9, and what an incredibly important issue it is. And also, says John, the axe is already laid at the root of the tree.

Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I believe we need to concern ourselves with the gospel axe. You see, many of us, if we apply an axe at all, are applying the axe to the twigs of the tree.

We're fussing around with the fruits of sin. We haven't come anywhere near the roots of sin. John took the gospel axe to the root of the tree.

Some years ago, I agreed to a series of 18 one-night stands throughout New England, sponsored by one of the Baptist denominations. It was an exhausting 18 days. But on toward the end of the second week, I arrived at a church just where Cape Cod verges out from the main coast.

And on a Sunday night, I walked in and sat down on the platform. And as I looked over the congregation, I gasped. There was somebody in every pew.

But there was nobody sitting anywhere near anybody, except an occasional husband and wife that were apparently still on speaking terms. I sat there pondering that strange and tragic phenomenon. And I kept thinking, I wonder what has brought this about? When I stood to preach, I said, I have been observing the seating pattern.

And I know something is mighty wrong. But that's not what God has burdened me to preach upon tonight, so I lay it aside. And I announced my text and preached my sermon.

Immediately afterward, the leaders of the church huddled around me and said, Mr. Roberts, you must come back. We've got to have a series of meetings. I said, I'm sorry, I can't.

Simply no time. And one of them with a lot of gall said to me, do you carry a pocket diary? I said, yes. He said, give it to me.

So I took it out of my pocket and handed it to him. First and only time in my life I was ever asked to do that. He began leafing through it.

He said, you can't say you can't come. You've got a Saturday night and a Sunday and a Monday night with no appointments. And that's only six weeks from now.

You must come. I said, you don't observe that I'm an old man? You don't think I have ever any reason to be home with my wife? He said, the need is urgent. You must come.

And I said, all right, I will. And when I arrived for that Saturday night, imagine a series of meetings, Saturday night, Sunday and Monday, first time in my life ever had that particular pattern. When I stepped

out on the platform, I almost fell over because there were about three times as many present as had been present on the Sunday night earlier.

And they were all crammed together in the center section. And I said to them, some of you will feel very strongly that you must tell me what's been wrong. I forbid each and all of you to do so.

I don't want to hear from anybody what's been wrong. I said, like John the Baptist, I've come with the gospel acts, and I'm going for the root. And that Saturday night, that was honored.

And Sunday morning, it was honored. And Sunday evening, a little bit of a woman slipped up to me, and she said, I must meet with you. I said, I do not meet with women, except in very public places.

Well, she said, this is very urgent. I said, is this to tell me what's wrong? Oh, no, no, no. I heard what you said about that last night.

No, no, not that. Well, I said, I have no desire to meet with you. But if you insist, I shall be having my breakfast.

And I named the hotel, and I named the hour. It was a huge dining room. I said, I'll be seated in the middle of the dining room.

And she came. And she barely got herself seated before she began to tear to shreds the organist. I kept holding up my hand, stop, stop, stop.

I refuse to listen. But I couldn't stop her. And when the poor organist was nothing but shreds, she then turned on the song leader.

And my, did she give him a lacing. And all the time, I'm trying to stop her. But when finally she's vented herself, I said to her, you're one tremendous choir director, aren't you? She was the choir director.

She said, I did not think you would mock me. I said, you don't know me. I don't have to.

I don't have to resort to mockery. I have declared an absolute truth. You are one tremendous choir leader.

I sat on the front row when you came in with the choir on Sunday morning. Even Napoleon could not have had the kind of command over his troops that you had over that choir. I almost fell under the bench when you sang.

It was incredibly beautiful. You are a terrific choir director. She said, you really do mean that, don't you? Yes, I said, I really do.

Well, thank you. I said, I wonder if it has occurred to you that little bit of you, she was just a very small woman, little bit of you without any help whatsoever can completely destroy this church. And you've done a whole lot already in that direction.

She gasped. She said, how could you say something like that? And I said to her, and listen now, there's never anyone more dangerous in the church than a gifted person who serves God with their gifts and not with his graces. She looked horrified.

She said, I don't understand what you mean. I took an hour explaining to her the difference between serving God with gifts and serving him with grace. And I pause and ask you, is your service that of gifts or

that of grace? It takes a great deal of time and serious prayer and thoughtful concern to be certain that on every occasion of service, it is service in grace, that our gifts are at all times bathed by divine grace that is never the flesh, but always the spirit that is ministering.

My dear friends, if we're going to prepare the way of the Lord, we're going to have to see to it that our gifts are saturated with our graces, just as John the Baptist did. Can you imagine a more gifted man than John the Baptist? Or can you imagine a more gracious man? His message, bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance. You've noticed, I'm sure, as we were reading the passage, the three different groups that responded, verse 10, the multitudes, verse 12, the tax gatherers, verse 14, the soldiers, and the urgent word that John spoke to each of those three groups.

And then finally, in terms of the message, the very significant words of verse 17, and his winnowing fork is in his hand to clean out his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. What if the Lord came with his winnowing fork tonight? How much would be pure chaff that had to be consumed in the fire? But now let me seek to make some direct applications of these matters that I've tried to hold in front of you tonight. We have been faced already this weekend with the issue of sin, and I shall not spend any considerable time on it, but certainly many of us who are not guilty of wild and awful sins of the flesh may very well be guilty of incredibly awful sins of the Spirit.

And surely pride is the very ultimate in sin against God. So I plead with you again to deal with pride and to do so in a very biblical fashion. Sins of omission, oh how the church needs to seek repentance in terms of its prayer life.

What a tragic day in which to live when prayer has become a ridiculous joke in the typical church. But as I said, I don't intend to concentrate upon sin. I made mention in passing yesterday of the problem of dead works, and I do intend to speak a little more carefully on that matter at this time.

Do you know what a dead work is? We are required to repent of our dead works. How can we do so if we have no notion of what constitutes a dead work? Well number one, a dead work is anything we do where we hope to gain merit from God in what we do. For a high percentage of church membership there, accepting Christ is nothing but a dead work.

They hope to gain some merit. I already used the term fire escape. They don't care anything about God, whether God lives, whether God dies, wouldn't mean anything to them.

But just the possibility of a hell that they may be sent to concerns them sufficiently so they engage in some silly little motion that some very unwise and ungodly preacher encourage them to believe constituted salvation. The dead work of decisional regeneration. We ought to get serious about this.

In my mind, it's absurd to talk about revival and to go on making converts who are twofold more children of hell than we are ourselves. It's about time we got serious and preached the gospel of Christ instead of the nonsense of American Christianity. The dead work of doing something in which we hope to gain merit with God.

Oh, we may not couch it in those words. We may be much more sensitive, wise in our language, but the result is the same. A dead work is also anything I do that has no capacity to be made alive by the Holy Spirit.

For instance, we read, if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. Thus, prayer becomes a dead work. There is no capacity for prayer out of a sinful heart to be quickened by the Holy Spirit, to be made alive, to be made effective.

A man can preach beautiful sermons and sway multitudes by his words, and yet all of his preaching can be nothing other than dead work, because he has no capacity to be touched by the Spirit of God, because he harbors some sin in his heart. I have been dealing recently with pastors who have turned into moral dens of iniquity. I spent three hours with a man one afternoon a while back.

He came to my office, and for three hours he told me of his moral intentions. He had already filed for divorce from his wife. He was fully intending to run off with another woman.

I begged him. I pled with him. I gave him every relevant scripture I could think of, urging him to turn from his wicked ways.

And suddenly he looked at his watch, and he said, oh my, I've got to go. I'm preaching tonight. And he rushed off and preached in a church that I happened to be the supply preacher in at that time.

Oh, my heart just broke. Any ministry that cannot be set afire by the Holy Spirit is nothing other than a dead work. The choir director of whom I spoke a few moments ago, her labors were nothing other than dead works doing incredible damage in the church.

It's not only that they're dead works, but the damage of dead works is phenomenal. But also one must say that not only is a dead work anything we do to gain merit with God, and not only is a dead work anything we do that cannot be made alive and powerful by the Holy Spirit, but third, a dead work is any ministry, any action in which we engage and do so in the power of the flesh and do not seek the enabling of the Holy Spirit. And many a man preaches Sunday after Sunday, and he has spent no time at all wrestling in prayer and pleading with God for a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire.

I'm talking about matters that must be faced in preparing the way of the Lord. Sin. Dead works.

And now I mentioned the issue of erroneous doctrine. The American church is plagued with false doctrine. I'll perhaps make some lifetime enemies now, but you won't be able to stand before the throne and say, I never knew.

After tonight, you're going to understand. We have made an incredible error in equating, as if they were synonyms, such terms as conversion, salvation, regeneration, justification. How dumb is the Holy Spirit? Do you think he's so dumb that he would take words with radically different meaning and treat them as synonyms? We've got to begin this portion of my message by facing the fact that he is both the Holy Spirit and the all-wise Spirit.

Now you see, what we are doing today is pretending that people are born again as a result of their exercise of repentance and faith. I don't care whether you like this or not. The only way you're going to avoid it is to get up and leave.

Because if you stay, you're going to hear me out on this matter. It is both intellectually absurd and it is an affront to God to pretend that repentance and faith lead to regeneration. That's sheer nonsense.

Have you got a Bible? Turn, if you will, to John chapter 2 and let me give you a biblical dose on this subject. Do you realize that at the end of the second chapter of John, there is a very, very forceful issue that is pressed upon us? Let me read the last three verses of John chapter 2. Now, when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in his name because I've got to get this in the right light. My eyes are a bit dim.

Let me start again. Verse 23. Now, when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in his name, beholding his signs which he was doing.

But Jesus, on his part, was not entrusting himself to them, for he knew all men and because he did not need that anyone should bear witness concerning man, for he himself knew what was in man. Now, if you haven't figured this one out, you should. Here comes a crowd, we have no idea how many, and they report to Jesus that they believe as a result of the signs that they have seen him perform.

On his part, he simply rejects their claim to faith. Now, most of us understand that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. We have no grounds whatsoever to suppose that people come to faith as a result of sight.

I'm not saying it couldn't happen if God determined it. I'm saying we've no grounds to suppose that that is really true. But without getting into the depths of that, let me simply insist on what the passage says.

A multitude came saying they believed as a result of what they saw, and he rejected their claim to faith. First, he didn't need their affirmation. I want to speak to the pastors here and say, you are indeed an extraordinary danger to the kingdom of God when you require the affirmation of men.

And one of the major tragedies of our day is those men in positions of leadership who can't live without a claim. And if you need a claim, you'll bend the message in whatever direction it takes to get the acclaim that you require. And in a wicked day like this, when the church is in such degenerate condition, you're not going to get much acclaim if you stick to the truth.

I want to plead with you to seek total deliverance from all need of human affirmation. Our Lord was able to say at the end, I have finished the work that thou gavest me to do, because he was totally free of any need of human affirmation. It was enough for the Father to say, well done.

But what about you? Our Lord knew what was in their hearts. That's also plain. He didn't accept their claim to faith because he knew what was in their hearts.

But now this is the point we must come to. What is stated in chapter three about a multitude is narrowed down. No, what's stated at the end of chapter two is narrowed down in the beginning of chapter three to a single individual.

You're aware of that? You face the fact that when Nicodemus came to Christ that night, he made the same claim to faith that the multitude had made? Read it for yourself. Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to him by night, and he said to him, Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Now, I ask you, do you think Christ is inconsistent? Do you think he would send away a multitude because of their false claim to faith and then accept a prominent individual? You wouldn't dare think such a thought

concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. But there's another incredible matter here. What our Lord does in this passage is to draw a comparison between physical birth and spiritual birth.

Can you imagine the greatest teacher of all time drawing parallels of non-parallels? You follow me? I've stated already, he makes a parallel between physical birth and spiritual birth. But the interpretation of the American church in regard to this passage says there is no parallel here. Christ was a stupid teacher.

He didn't know what he was doing. He wasted the time of this significant man. He spoke absolute foolishness.

He said to Nicodemus, a man cannot see the kingdom of God unless he's born again. He said again, a man cannot enter the kingdom of God unless he's born again. But in actual fact, you see, we are born again as a result of what we've seen.

We're born again as a result of our repentance and our faith. That's the teaching that many of you have been engaged in. And that's the teaching under which some of you who are not teachers have suffered for years.

Heresy, nonsense, foolishness, ridiculousness. And in talking about preparation for revival, we better set our hearts to take out some of these crooked truths and get things lined up with Holy Scripture. Listen, if I were to ask an individual here, in fact, I'll do this for my dear friend, what part did you have in your physical conception and birth? We all have to say the same thing, absolutely none.

We are the result of the other. Please, I beg of you, understand. Regeneration is that work of the Holy Spirit that takes away the blindness of the eye and the deafness of the ear and the hardness of the heart and enables a person to hear the word of God and to receive those two precious gifts of repentance and faith and to be converted.

If you insist on putting regeneration after repentance and faith, you will produce multitudes of unregenerate persons who have been confused into believing they are born again when all they've ever engaged in is a dead work. I could not begin to speak of this with the degree of seriousness that it deserves. I don't suppose there's any other single doctrine that I've held forth on that has earned me more enemies than this doctrine.

But you couldn't make me back down on this, even if all of you made it clear this was the last sermon I ever preached. Now, this is tremendously urgent for many reasons, but I want to pinpoint the issue of prayer in the church. It has become a farce.

Most churches have discontinued the prayer meeting, or if they still have it, the pastor pleasantly says, well, you know, there's a few old people in the church. They're not good for anything else, and they want to be active and do something, so we let them have their prayer meeting. And these prayer meetings have been described by many with such terms as organ recitals, when the old folk get together and discuss their aches and pains and pray for one another and their suffering friends and family.

Whatever happened to the concept, my house shall be called the house of prayer. Well, if you think you can win men to Christ and get them regenerated as a result of your activity, you don't need prayer for that. In fact, prayer is a hindrance.

If you're going to have to wait upon God to regenerate a person before they can repent and believe, you're going to slow everything down. I believe with all my heart that many of our megachurches would be about the size of your church if they stuck to the truth. When you understand that the only people who are able to repent and believe are those who have been quickened by the Holy Spirit, then you're cast up upon prayer.

Imagine a church where every believer gathers at least once a week for prayer, and at the heart of their prayer is that the Spirit of God will quicken men and women. I don't care whether you agree with my viewpoint or not, but I can delight in the truth that I know, whether you like it or not. Spend my incredible joy time after time in preaching the Word of God to see people come alive under the preaching of the Word.

I think some of you are so fond of invitations because you don't have that much confidence in the Holy Spirit and the Word. Now, I'm not speaking against invitations, but in comparison with what the Holy Spirit does through the Word, invitations are pretty insignificant. But I want to be sure you understand.

You don't have to believe me, but I've got to be sure you understand that dead men do not repent. Dead men do not believe. We are all dead in trespasses and in sins until we are quickened by the Holy Spirit.

And in preparation for revival, we've got to band together and plead that God will indeed come in the power of the Spirit and quicken multitudes and enable them to hear, to feel, to see the kingdom of God. Poor Nicodemus, he comes saying he believes, and Jesus sends him away saying, you can't even see the kingdom of God in your deadness. But oh, for the day when a band of mighty men of God preach and confidence the Word of God and watch as multitudes are brought forth from the dead under the preaching of the Word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Now listen, in case you need some further fortification of what I've said, why do you think it is that most of our evangelistic agencies, when they're honest, admit that up to 97% of their converts have fallen away within two years? I'm not all that fond of Charles G. Finney. I think he made some very severe errors, but believe me, if Finney felt that 5% of the converts were falling away in two years, he would have spent hours and hours in his prayer chamber until he got things right with God. And here, if you say something to some evangelistic agency about this incredible fallaway rate, 80%, 90%, 92%, 95%, 97%, the first thing they want you to know is it's not the problem of our evangelism, it's the problem of the follow-up.

Nonsense! You can't follow up the dead! And if you try, you're going to wear yourself into sheer exhaustion. The problem is in the message. We don't take the Holy Spirit and the words seriously enough.

And when we have these things right, we're not going to see the fallaway rate that we're seeing now. Isn't it lovely that our Savior was able to address the Father and to say, of those whom thou hast given me, I have lost none. And true evangelism produces true converts that endure.

Preparing the way of the Lord means we must deal with sin, we must deal with dead works, we must deal with false teaching. And may I add as well, we must also deal with false practices. I know it's late, but I warned you in advance, I haven't been unfair in that regard at least.

When our Lord said, my house shall be called a house of prayer, what do you think he meant? Do you think he meant that there would be some praying people in it? I don't believe that for a moment. I believe he meant that every believer would be praying with every other believer. Have you stopped to think of this

fact? Our Lord made it clear, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

In the typical church, the general feeling seems to be, well, you know, there's some people who have the gift of prayer, and some who have the gift of teaching, some who have that gift and the other gift. And so let the people with the gift of prayer do the praying, and let those with the gift of teaching, and so on. What garbage.

My house shall be a house of prayer. Any church where a portion of the people pray, and a portion do not, is a house divided against itself. And one of the major reasons why tens of thousands of men are leaving the ministry these days, is because the house is so badly divided, they can't even see their way to continue in the ministry to which God called them.

And of course, many are not just simply turning aside to other occupations, but many of them are going down the tubes morally. Our Lord gave that incredible story at the end of the Sermon on the Mount about the two men building, the one who builds upon the sand, and the other one who builds upon the rock. And a church that has a portion of its people praying, and a portion not praying, is a house built upon the sand.

Christianity requires that all, within a given fellowship, be men and women of prayer. Now, it's not that way, but brothers who are pastors, I want to tell you, if you're content to pastor a church that is divided against itself, there's something seriously wrong with your heart. Why should you not set your heart to pastor a flock of people who pray together? Why should you not determine that under God, every single believer will participate regularly in the prayer life of the church? We need some holy and high goals, and I can't conceive of anything more urgent than turning the house of God into a house of prayer.

But I would also like to mention some of the other foolish things in which the church engages. I want to speak just for a moment about children. The church is dumbing down the message to the children.

Children are being treated as if they were idiots. The church, these days, is doing the same ridiculous thing the public school is doing, turning everything down to the lowest level. One of the major reasons why the homeschool movement is flourishing and producing wonderful effect is because those children are being treated for what they are, intelligent human beings with incredible capacity to embrace divine truth.

We, if given opportunity, could hear dozens and dozens of testimonies of people right here tonight who, as a child, thoroughly embraced the gospel of Christ and understood many of the deepest things of the Christian faith, and yet we treat the children as if they had only partial intellects. Oh, that the church might begin to seize the potential of these lovely children. And you all understand, don't you, that in some of the mighty revival movements of the past, it's been the prayer meetings of the children that have had such profound impact.

But let me speak as well about the matter of Christian fellowship. Someone else spoke of this issue already this week. We regard Christian fellowship as just being neighborly, as being friendly, as being a bit kindly toward one another.

Not many churches practice what I would think is genuine Christian fellowship. How long has it been since someone stepped up to you in an obvious spirit of love and said, now listen, brother, I'm concerned about you. How are you doing spiritually? I require you to give me a history of your recent walk with the Lord.

Why, you could be a member of a typical church for 20 years and never once in those 20 years ever have anybody who really extended Christian fellowship to you. What's wrong with the old Methodist class

meeting concept where every individual was personally shepherded and cared for with great diligence? Maggie and I had a rather incredible experience along these lines. I was teaching at that time in one of the large churches in our area, and I had been giving a series on Christian hospitality and what it really meant.

And then suddenly it came to our attention that an elderly couple in our church who had been faithful members had gone home after the Sunday morning service and by pre-arrangement had their lunch together, and then he took a gun and shot his wife through the head, and then he shot himself through the head. And I had the gall the next Sunday. That was all hushed up.

Nobody was supposed to know that happened, but I had the gall to get up and to say, we call this a Christian church. We say we practice Christian fellowship, and yet there's a couple in our midst that are sunk so low that they enter into a pact of mutual suicide, and nobody has the foggiest notion that they are in such desperate circumstances. We need to get serious about Christian fellowship.

Well, they got serious, all right. The elders summoned me in the next week and ordered me to cease all that type of teaching and preaching, and when I refused, they then arranged for my easy departure from the church. And I was only there as a volunteer teacher.

But now listen, friends. That afternoon, that Sunday afternoon where I spoke so clearly on the issue of Christian fellowship, I got very agitated in my spirit, and I just couldn't get out of my mind the young African boy who Maggie had met somewhere along the line. He was a student in the college, and she had invited him home to dinner, and it just dawned on me that that boy's been in our home maybe five or six times, and all we really did was to extend American hospitality to him with a little Christian flavor.

And I went to Maggie, and I said, Maggie, I'm very agitated about this boy Tunji. Well, she said, so am I. I said, you must get on the phone and reach that boy and get him here quickly. And she called him, and after a while I was able to reach him, and he came, I think, perhaps on Tuesday for dinner, and we had dinner together.

Then he and I went and sat in easy chairs, and I said to him, Tunji, first I must apologize to you. We have shown you American hospitality, but we've never really offered Christian fellowship, and tonight I must ask you how you are doing spiritually. Suddenly he erupted into the most awful wail that was ever sounded in that room.

He was in one of these swivel rockers. The whole chair just shook and vibrated with his sobs. It was quite a long time before I could even distinguish a single word he spoke, but eventually it became clear he was crying out, no man cares for my soul, no man cares for my soul, over and over, no man cares for my soul.

Eventually he got control of himself, and he said to me, you are the first man since I came to America who asked how I was doing spiritually. He said, in my own country I had memorized 500 hymns, and I was constantly singing and whistling and humming. I had four stated seasons of prayer every single day.

I walked and talked with God, but since being in Wheaton, I have forgotten all the hymns. I haven't been able to pray at all for months. In fact, when Mrs. Roberts called me, I had laid my plans to commit suicide, and if it had not been for her telephone call, I would be dead tonight.

And God in his grace reached out and touched that boy and restored him. I'm telling you, we need to get ready. We need to prepare the way of the Lord.

We're going to have to take some of these matters seriously. We're going to have to stop engaging in all this foolishness that we call church and get down to the serious business of helping one another along the way into the kingdom of God. Well, I've said a lot, and I finish now.

I understand as you do that John's role was peculiar, it was special, it was wonderful. None of us will ever be called to be the forerunner in the same exact sense that John was, but we are in desperate need of another visitation, and we're not ready for it, and we need to prepare the way of the Lord. Will you do what you can and what you must, and do it in wonderful expectation that the Lord himself will soon be among us, manifesting his glory and advancing his kingdom.

Now, Lord, most of us are well aware of these matters. They have concerned us in the past to some degree, but we face them afresh tonight, and we're in danger now, even as we've been before, of allowing these sacred matters to be snatched away and to go on even as we have done so often in the past. In your grace and in your mercy, will you enable each of us, first in our own lives, to prepare the way of the Lord, and then to do everything in the arena where you have placed us to prepare others for his coming, and grant in your great mercy that we will not languish long in our present condition, but even as the psalmist has stated it, that we may once again rejoice because you have revived us, and to thee be forever the praise and the glory.

Amen.

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