

January 16, 2000

Scripture: *Take the Gospel Quickly*

Message: *John 4 : 4 -38*

I have been a preacher for 40 years. I was a sophomore in college when I understood that God had a claim on my life. To be a preacher and to be a preacher who is a pastor is two different things. To be a preacher who is a pastor means that you must have something to say every 7 days. There is a little joke among preachers that sometime we have something to say and then sometime we just have to say something. Some sermons I preach, and I need to say to you that I have been your pastor for 12 years, and the best estimate I have is I have preached 550 sermons for you on Sunday morning. Some of those sermons are like pulling up dry sand out of dry wells. Sometimes I have studied long and feel that God has honored that I have explained to you scripture. Sometimes sermons come easily. I think that God does that to preachers to encourage them, but He doesn't do it too often because that makes us lazy. Then sometimes God just very clearly says this is what I want you to say, and we have very little control over it, and it becomes more of a mandate of something we must say. The reason I am going through that long explanation with you is because the way the sermon is going to end today is one of the latter. It is something I have been told to say, and I really don't have any choice. I think you will understand that as we move in the sermon.

Now, will you turn to John, Chapter 4 in your Bible. Those of you who are familiar with this story, you remember it is Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman at a well. His disciples recognized they didn't have anything to eat. They go into town to find something to eat. Jesus talks to this Samaritan woman while they are gone. He helps her to understand that He is the Messiah of the world. She goes running into town to get the rest of the people in the village to come out and tell the remarkable story; that is, the Messiah is out by a well. The picture is the disciples have come back with food. Behind them all of the people in town are running out. Jesus in that context is going to talk about physical food and spiritual food. Then He is going to give a great spiritual principle that is the basis of what I want to talk with you about today.

*Verse 31: Meanwhile His disciples urge him "Rabbi, eat something."
But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."
Then His disciples said to each other. "Could someone have brought Him food?" "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work."*

There are times when spiritual food is much more important than just any kind of physical food. Then Jesus sees all of these people coming out of town. He turns to them, and this is what He says:

"Do you not say four months more, and then the harvest? I tell you, open your eyes, and look on the fields. These people who are coming to you, for they are ripe to harvest."

When I was in high school, I ran on our track team. I could not run very far, but I could run very fast for a short period of time. So I was on the short dashes and the relays. When I was a senior in high school, we were in a very close contest to be state champions. The last races in the track part of a meet are the relays. Four of us on the team were warming up. Our coach, Melvin Giller, came to us and said, "You are aware what the results of the relay race may determine, who is going to be the state champions. I want to challenge you to be your very best. If you win, you will be able to look back on these days and say you were the best. You can make yourself proud. Your teammates will be proud. The school will be proud. When you run, I just simply want you to answer one question. I want you to ask yourself as you run, are you running as fast as you can run?"

Now there are some things in life that take a long time to occur. It takes patience. It takes faithful endurance. There are many things it takes time to grow, and there is just no way to hurry it. The man who planted a garden and went out every day and pulled the carrots out of the ground to see if they were growing didn't understand their principle. There are some things you can't hurry. But there are some things in life that are time sensitive. If you don't do it then, it will be more difficult later. And if you don't do it then, the door of opportunity may be closed. Really a part of the maturity in life is to understand what things call for long term patience, and what things are time sensitive. For example, it is time sensitive to help your children to come to know Jesus.

Those of you who were in the service last week remember that three or four rows here were full of young people 12 years of age who had come to us to visit from a Presbyterian church. The reason they had come is they are in what is called a communicant's class because the most logical time we have found is for young people to give their life to Christ, as Savior and Lord, is about 12 years of age. That is the time when they are able to conceptualize. That is the time when they are able to understand. That is the time when they have lived long enough to understand that they are sinners. So the normal age is about 12, though I hasten to say to you that with television and all of the other educational advances we are finding many children 6 and 7 and 8 years of age who are able to conceptualize of what used to be 12 years of age. What we have found is that if a child goes past 12, it becomes much more difficult to bring them to faith in Christ. That is the age that they begin to deal with things like who they are, why they are here, and where they are going. They begin to deal with things of what is important, who do I listen to, what does God have to say to my own life. It is a time when they begin to build a world system, and the reality is if they don't build a world system when they are in their early teens, they find out there is a world system already waiting to impose itself on them. So it is very important that they come to do that. Now what you don't want to do with your children is to push them too fast, but what you do want to do is to influence them as best you can because you recognize that children coming to faith in Christ is a time sensitive matter.

Another area of life that is time sensitive is your children living at home. Those of us who have now gotten older and our children have left home, we look back and wonder where did all that time go. It seemed to go by so fast. What you are going to find as your children grow up is that time is going to get by so fast, it makes you be aware that you need to use every opportunity that you can to try to be an example and to influence them for the cause of Christ. What you hope that they will know about you when they leave home is that you cared for them, you provided for them, you made provision for them maybe to go to college, but as a Christian parent what you are really interested in is do they walk about knowing that you have helped them to build a relationship with God and that is important for you. What they will want to know is did you tell them that Christianity is necessary and not just nice? Did you teach them that the commands of God are not personal preference? They are the authoritative word of God. Did you teach them that right or wrong is not what you think is right and what I think is right, but really what God says? Did you help them to understand that to you church is important, and it is not something to be treated casually? So when they leave, you are in a ticking clock situation, and you have a limited amount of time to be able to impart to them what is important in life.

What we have found in church is that is time sensitive when a person first comes into our church. After two years of study, 25 of the top lay leaders of our congregation recognized that the most critical times, many times, is that first year a person comes into a church family. For many of them they are giving their heart and life to Christ for the first time. A mistake that we who have been Christians a long time make is that we think that a person who has just come to Christ understands everything that we understand. Well, that is foolish, for a first grader doesn't understand the same as someone who had gone through twelve grades of school. So they need to be taught and to be helped. But it is also important for people who have been members even of other Baptist churches to have a time of training. Some people think that all Southern Baptist churches are monolithic. If you think that, I've got news for you. Many times people come into our fellowship who come from other faiths and traditions. If you are not aware of it, 40% of the people who join this church do not have a Baptist background. So for them to come into a church like Bon Air, they need a time when somebody sits down and says, this is what this church is about. They also need a time when they can understand, because most people who join the church want to get involved, want to make a contribution, want to make a difference. How are they going to learn that? Under what method do we have to teach them this, is a way in which you can plug in, and this is a difference you can make. So we are understanding more and more how very time sensitive it is for someone who comes into a church the first year that they were there.

Last year I attended a meeting of the leading political leaders in the city of Richmond. The City Attorney was there. The Superintendent of Schools was there. The Chief of Police was there. All of them to communicate to religious leaders one truth; that is, they wanted to communicate how important elementary school is. What they said is this. By the time a child reaches the 6th grade, if he does not have a good background, you can almost plot the rest of his school years. So it is so important that we have the best teachers and the best sort of schooling, and the best methods possible by the time they are 12. So what am I emphasizing? I am emphasizing to you that sometimes things

are time sensitive. You go to a doctor. He examines you. He says I have found you have a problem. Then he turns and he says I wish you had come three months earlier. I could have done something for you three months earlier. Now it is going to be more difficult. There are some things that are time sensitive. I picked up a jar of vitamins the other day. I bought it somewhere, and finally decided I needed to start taking them. I opened them up and then I looked on the side, and it said, "Good if used by 1998." There are some things in life that are time sensitive.

Now listen to where I am going. Listen to Jesus. These people are rushing out of town. Jesus says let me tell you, disciples, a lesson you are always to remember. Opportunities are sometime, time sensitive. You are going to see all these people, and they are on a trip, and they are going to say, Lord, we are on a trip, we don't have time to deal with all these folks. They hadn't had anything to eat. Lord, you surely don't expect us to give up our evening meal to deal with these people. And Lord, they are not our kind of folk. So we don't want to deal with them. Lord, if we deal with them, we will deal with them after we take care of ourselves. Then we'll do it. So Jesus comes with this truth. You say you have four months. You say another opportunity will come. You say if I don't do it now, I will do it later. Jesus says what you need to understand the fields are already ready for harvest, and if you don't do it now, then the door is going to close. We need to understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ is TIME SENSITIVE. Most of the opportunities that I find in my Christian life I didn't sit down and strategize to bring about. He brought them to me. What He says to me is I want to see if you have learned the lesson that you need to respond when I provide the opportunity. What we need to be challenged about as believers is that what we are going to do for Christ, we need to do it now. What we are going to do as a church for Christ, we need to ask the question my track coach asked, "Are we running as fast as we can run" ? or do we have the mistaken opinion that if we don't do it now, we will get it four months later?

Let me remind you of what is going on around you to make the gospel so time sensitive. What's going on is that you and I are living in a phone-me, that many people are not aware it is happening. That is the rapid rise of population. If you have never heard these statistics, it is good for you to learn them. It was not until 1850 that the population of the world reached 1 billion. As best as scientists can understand at the time of Jesus, 2000 years ago, the population of the entire world wasn't but 250,000 people. That is about how many people are in the United States. It remained about static until the late 1800s, and in 1850 for the first time 1 billion. When we went into the 1900s, we passed 2 billion. We have just gone into the 2000s, so in 100 years we have gone from 2 billion to 6 billion. By the time your children who are around here get to be as old as I am, there will be 12 billion people on the face of the earth. To go at a world that had 250 billion or 100 billion is quite different in a world that has 12 billion people. We need to understand that there are not four months. It is time sensitive, and we need to get the message of Christ out as fast as we can to every person.

A second reason that we need to be time sensitive about it is we need to understand that other religions are working to spread their message. All of you are aware, I think, that when you go fill up your gas tank that usually part of that money goes to the Middle East. The richest people in the world today are in the Middle East. That money is being poured back in all sections of the world to spread the message of Islam. If

you do not know it, Islam has a goal. The goal is that there will be a mosque every 6 miles in the world. Billions of oil money is going to spread the message of Islam. If you don't there, and we don't get there with the message of Christ, somebody else is going to get there with a different kind of message indeed.

The third reason that we need to hurry is because of the moral culture in which we live. We as people have genius in our brain but sin in our heart. So it seems that everything we create, we turn around and corrupt with our hands. For example, the internet is a wonderful thought. Whoever thought that up is tremendous. But are you aware that according to the American Family Association that on the internet right now are 450 web sites for _____.. You children enjoy video games. It is a nice way for kids to spend time. But we dealt with two boys running through Denver's Columbine High School shooting people. You know what was in their room? Video games. Do you know what the video games were? They were a version of the same kind of games that the U.S. Army teaches soldiers how to get over their inhibitions to shoot people. So why are we surprised when kids come running out of their bedroom shooting people when that is exactly the same thing they used to get soldiers to shoot people?

Twenty years or so ago we passed a law in our country that it is all right for a mother to take the life of her own baby before it is born. Now we are finding live babies behind corn flake boxes in stores in Houston, in trash cans in New York. And if you are not aware the latest statistics are that in every major city in America, there is now a live baby being rescued every month. This Sunday around America we are talking about Sanctity of Life. We understand that we have come up with all these new ideas, and then we corrupt it with our hands.

Dear folk, if you and I don't get serious about sharing the message of Christ, I can tell you moral culture will drive us out of business. It is time sensitive when you recognize that today 40 million people are displaced from their homes because of war. That is more people than live in Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida combined. Many of these people are starving to death because war has taken them away. Today in the world as best we can tell 30 million people have the HIV virus, and most of them will be dead in 7 years.

The gospel is time sensitive. If you think we can sit in a nice, comfortable, suburban Richmond and say we'll get to that later, then you and I don't understand in the world in which we live, and we don't understand the gospel that we have to proclaim.

I told you the sermon was going to end differently. This is what I don't have any control over. What I want to do in these next few moments is to challenge you as a church congregation to run faster than we have ever run before. Here are the suggestions:

Number one- that you and I would follow through what we have set for our goal this year; that is, every member of our congregation would become involved in some direct mission action. What would happen in this part of Richmond if 2,500 people said we are going to do something special this year to spread the message of Christ. I will be a tutor. I will get involved in a goodwill center. I will be involved in our international ministry. I will get involved in the prison ministry. I will..... What would happen if all 2,500 of us said this year, 12 months, we are going to make a difference for Christ? Who am I looking for? I am looking for people who are willing to be models. The way life works is if somebody steps forward, then the person who is kind of in the background

says I will do that. What we are looking for is the first wave, a beachhead, of people who will say count me on. I will do something. I don't mind being an encourager to try to help others. My, what a difference it would make if you and I would take that challenge seriously.

The second thing I want to challenge you to do is I want us to pray in a new dimension. All of the history records show that when the gospel is shared more quickly it has been because first of all people have been praying on their needs to come to faith in Christ. I want to challenge, I wanted to ask if we did not have in our congregation 500 people who will say every day of my life I will just pray, if it is 5 seconds or 30 seconds, every day of my life, I will pray that people who don't know Jesus will come to know Him. What would happen if 500 of our folk every day prayed Lord whether it is my neighbor or whether it is somebody in South Carolina or somebody in Australia, every day, Lord, I pray. I am going to be looking for 500 folks.

The third thing I want to suggest: I wanted to suggest to you that you and I as church members learn how to share our faith naturally with others. So many people come to me and say well, you know, I am not worthy. I don't know how to do that. I don't want to turn people off. Well, the answer to it is you need training, and you need to do it not to gather somebody in a room and be obnoxious, but to normally, naturally be able to share your faith in Christ. This year we are going to be looking for 400 people who are willing to take the necessary training where they will be able to say I can share my faith in Jesus Christ. Young people and children, this is not an adult thing. Children, many times you can win people to faith in Christ when adults never can. And you have doors open to you that we adults never have open. I hope that our children and our youth will be some of these 400 people who are going to learn this year how to share your faith in Christ.

The fourth thing I want to suggest: I want us to re-examine all the ways in which we give money to causes outside of ourselves. And I want us to ask the question on one condition; that is, is this helping us do the job as fast as it needs to be done. If it is not, then we need to re-examine what we are doing.

The fifth thing: I wanted to challenge some of our teenagers. I wanted to ask you if this summer, next summer, in the summers ahead, if we couldn't find 10 of our teenagers who said I will give the Lord 10 weeks during the summer. The church would come and say we will give you \$1,000 on a college scholarship but we will use you in our ministries and you can get involved in different kinds of ways. I am praying that somehow among high school students and college students we would find 10 who would say I will do it.

Let me show you. I said I didn't have any control over this, but let me tell you this. After the first service one man came up to me and said if you find the 10 people, 10 teenagers, 10 college students, who will give 10 weeks in a summer, I can put them to work this summer. On the other hand, a man came to me and said if you find 10 young people who are committed to God and will give the Lord 10 weeks and we will give them \$1,000 scholarship, I will pay the \$10,000 for their scholarships. Young people, it is now in your ballpark. There is a place to serve. There is money to serve. The question is are you willing to spend the 10 weeks to say tell me what you want me to do, and I will give that time for the cause of Christ.

The sixth thing I wanted to challenge: We have been talking in our congregation for years now about our new facility. This friend of mine came by to see me the other day. He said, “How long have you been building?” I said, “Five years.” Five years ago we appointed the first committee to start studying this, and by the time it is finished in June, it will be a five year project. We have said that when that facility is finished what we would do is have a third worship service. What I wanted to ask you to pray about is that God will give us wisdom of how to do that and when to do that, that we would follow through with the commitment that we have made.

Here is the last one: In the past two and a half years, members of this congregation have been giving to our building fund. I want to commend you. You have been generous and faithful. By the time this year is over, members of our congregation will have given about \$3.6 million dollars for new facilities. I commend you for that. But I would also say to you that most of you have found that by giving on a regular basis, really your standard of living has not gone down. God has continued to bless you. You have been able to give, and you have been able to do it joyfully and cheerfully. This is my challenge. Whenever you finish your pledge, why don't you then take some of that money that you have been giving and give it to spread the message of Christ as fast as we can. This year the members of our congregation will give \$125,000 to our two mission offerings, Domestic Missions and International Missions. We are almost getting ready, probably this Sunday, to go over the top for the International Mission offering. We'll give \$125,000. This is what I wanted to challenge you to do. I wanted to challenge you next year, because most of us will have finished our pledges, I wanted to ask you next year not to give \$125,000 but \$250,000. I wanted to ask you that some of that money you have been channeling towards building, that you finish that, and you begin to challenge it, and we will be able to double what we are doing for missions.

This is also what I wanted to challenge. Because we are merging with Southampton Church, we will be placing in a Mission Endowment Fund \$235,000. That will be with the \$60,000 that is already there. So we will have \$300,000 that we will take the interest of until Jesus comes back for the cause of missions. What I wanted to challenge you to do is in the next few years to raise that to \$1,000,000. I want to tell you what it will mean. A normal endowment fund will get you 10%. If you have \$1,000,000 every year you are going to be able to go to some country in the world and say we have \$100,000 that we are to make a difference in yours. We have some members in the first service from Tanzania. You can go to the country of Tanzania with \$100,000, and you can build 100 churches. Some of our members are going to Siranam down in the northern part of South America in about a month. In Siranam you can build 75 churches with \$100,000. What joy would it give you as a congregation to be able to say I belong to a church that every year builds 1,000 churches for the cause of Christ. And all you have to do is take money that you are already giving and re-channel it, and in the years ahead you can help to spread the message of Christ in ways you never dreamed you could do.

The man who started the modern _____ missionary moment was an Englishman named William Cary. He was a man who fixed people's shoes. God gave him a little phrase that has been in our Christian circles for years. This is what it says. Attempt great for God. Expect great things from God. The reason many times we don't

expect great things from God is we don't attempt great things for God. I believe our God says if you will do it, I will be there to bless you and to take care of you.

In the country where my daughter is a missionary, Mozambique, there was a man by the name of Phillip Johnson who was another Englishman who came to Mozambique as a Protestant missionary. That has been over a hundred years ago. He landed in the northern part of the country. After a few weeks the man who was the head chief of that whole area heard of him and asked him to come and to talk to him. Phillip Johnson sat down with him and told him the gospel of Jesus Christ. The man who was head of the whole area said that is the most remarkable story I've ever heard. He said, "I really want to consider about whether I want to give my life to this God you are talking about." In the diary of Phillip Johnson, when he was recording that conversation, this is what the chief said next. But I want to ask you a question. If this is really true, what took you so long to get here and tell my people about it?"

Dear folk, you and I don't have a choice. We have to run as fast as we can run to get the story of Christ to the people across the street, the people across town, across state, and across the world. The gospel is time sensitive. Don't you think there is four months to harvest. It is already white to harvest.