

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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BARRIERS TO REVIVAL

Galatians 5:13-26

Last Sunday, you may recall, I talked with you about prevailing prayer. I said that prevailing prayer is passionate, persistent and patient. It is marked by spiritual fervor, holy boldness and an unwavering trust in the goodness and sovereignty of God who works all things together for good in the lives of His people. This is the kind of prayer that pleases God and to which Jesus calls us.

I also said that this kind of prevailing prayer is the prelude to revival. It is one of the means God uses to bring renewed spiritual fervor to the church and to bring unbelievers to faith in Christ. In his book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace maintains that prayer is “the main instrument through which the kingdom of God can be... advanced” by members of Christ’s church. I’m not sure I would go quite as far as Lovelace, for there are other means or instruments God uses for His kingdom purposes. But there is no doubt that prayer is one of the main instruments God uses, along with the faithful preaching of the gospel and the winsome witness of His people in both word and life, to advance His kingdom and bring renewed vitality to His church.

Prevailing prayer is the prelude to revival.

But, you may ask, what is revival? What does revival look like?

Here is a description of revival: It is a renewal of spiritual vitality sent to the church by the Holy Spirit, which produces in the lives of God’s people a deeper love and devotion to God and a more active concern for our neighbors. It is a renewing and deepening of our relationship with God, which affects every single area of our lives.

Another way to describe it is to say that revival is a return to spiritual health after a period of neglect or decline into sin and broken fellowship with God. An economy mired in recession can be revived. It has happened many times. A career in sports or entertainment or politics can be revived, even when it seems that one’s best days are over. An athlete or entertainer or politician can make a comeback. We’ve seen it happen. A marriage that seems headed for divorce can be renewed, revived, restored. It can become healthy again. The same thing can happen to a soul or to a church or even a denomination. In the spiritual realm, revival is a return or restoration to spiritual health after a period of spiritual decline. Revival is the sovereign and gracious work of God in which He restores spiritual health and vitality to His people by sending the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit to blow in our midst and the fresh fire of the Spirit to set our hearts on fire for Him again.

The need for revival presupposes a state of spiritual decline and disrepair in the life of the church and the culture in which we live. It presupposes that the church is not as vibrant

and healthy as God desires it to be. If the church were healthy and vigorous and growing as God intends – if the church were operating at full strength and peak efficiency, if there were no evidence of spiritual decline in either the church or the culture – there would be no need for revival. But the evidence of spiritual decline is all around us. It is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer – except to those who have become thoroughly desensitized to it. And the evidence, I fear, may be all too real in our own lives.

When our love and passion for God begins to wane,
 when the fire of our devotion to God does not burn as brightly as it once did,
 when our attention wanders from the Word of God and our commitment to the Word wavers,
 when (in the words of Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Romans 12:2) we become so well-adjusted to our culture that we fit into it without even thinking,
 when we allow other interests and priorities, however good they may be, to take precedence over the call of God and His priorities in our lives,
 when we begin to compromise with sin and rationalize our disobedience to God,
 when we become more concerned with our comfort than we are with the consistency of our testimony,
 when we become desensitized to sin all around us,
 when we are not stung when God’s name is misused and taken in vain,
 when our hearts are no longer broken by the things that break the heart of God –
 when any of these things happen in our lives, we need revival. We need our hearts touched and our spirits renewed by the Spirit of God.

How can we know if we stand in need of revival? By examining our hearts in the light of God’s Word.

How can we know if we need revival in our church? By measuring our church against the plumb line of God’s Word. In the Old Testament book of Amos, the prophet Amos described a vision God gave him (Amos 7:7-8). He said:

The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in His hand. And the Lord asked me, “What do you see, Amos?”
 “A plumb line,” I answered.
 Then the Lord said: “Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel.”

You see, God had built His people Israel according to His standards. But when they were measured, when they were tested, they were completely out of plumb. They were not living according to God’s standards.

God’s Word is the plumb line He holds before His people even today, so that we can know how we are to live and how far we have strayed from His ways.

How can we know if we need revival in our own lives?

By taking an honest look at our prevailing attitudes.

By an honest examination of the direction and manner of our lives.

By a thorough evaluation of the fruit we are bearing and what it says about the condition of our hearts.

By taking a hard, close look at the state of our soul's relationship with God and the integrity of our relationships with others.

To undertake such an examination of our spiritual state, we must be willing to ask hard questions of ourselves. And to give honest answers to questions such as these:

- Am I growing in grace and godliness?
- Am I actively pursuing holiness?
- Am I better off spiritually today than I was six months ago? A year ago? Five years ago?
- Am I becoming more and more like Jesus in my attitudes and actions?
- Am I bearing the fruit of the Spirit in my life, the qualities of a Christ-like character?
- Am I growing deeper in love with God?
- Or have I gotten stuck on a spiritual plateau?
- Have I become spiritually complacent?
- Have I become content to be a spiritual consumer instead of a fully-devoted follower of Christ?
- Have I allowed myself to be satisfied with spiritual mediocrity?
- Have I become too cozy with sin?
- Have I allowed the fire of my passion for God and His Word to die down?
- Has the temperature of my faith cooled?
- Am I just going through the motions, content to be a casual Christian?
- Am I living by the Spirit, or am I seeking to gratify the desires of my sinful nature?

If you're like me, some of these questions may make you uncomfortable.

As we read in Galatians 5, the Bible tells us that we are engaged in an ongoing battle with our old sinful nature. Even after we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Even after we have been born again. Even after we have been justified by grace through faith in the saving work of Christ on our behalf. Even after we have been made new creatures in Christ. There is still a battle that rages within us. It is not smooth sailing from here to eternity. As the Bible says in 1 Peter 2:11, our sinful desires continue to wage war against our souls. This is the reason that after he reminds the Galatians so emphatically in 5:1 that "it is for freedom that Christ has set us free," Paul goes on to admonish them (and us) in verse 13 not to use our freedom to indulge our sinful nature.

If we weren't tempted to indulge the sinful nature, if the desires of our sinful nature weren't so – well, desirable and appealing, Paul's instruction on this point would not be necessary. But it *is* necessary, precisely because the battle with our old nature and our sinful desires is still ongoing. It *is* necessary, simply because we live daily with the temptation, in one way or another, to gratify the desires of our sinful nature.

It is only by the grace of God and by daily dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit who regenerates us and renews us and takes up residence in us that we can overcome our sinful nature. It is only by daily dependence on the Holy Spirit that we can live a life that pleases God and produces the kind of fruit God desires.

When we don't do that,
 when we do not daily depend on the Holy Spirit for the guidance and strength we need,
 when we fall out of step with the Spirit,
 when we become lethargic in our faith,
 when we drift away from the Lord and begin engaging in questionable activities,
 we're in spiritual trouble.

So what do we need to do? We need to identify and then ruthlessly root out those sins we struggle with which are barriers to spiritual health and wholeness.

Paul gives a list of such sins (he describes them as “the acts of the sinful nature”) in Galatians 5:19-21. It is not an all-encompassing list, but it does cover a lot of territory. His list includes sexual sins, sins in the realm of worship, and social sins (that is, sins in the realm of interpersonal relationships). Any and all of these are barriers to spiritual health and vitality in the life of a believer, or in the life of a church. And they call for prompt repentance and renunciation. For such things, says Paul, are incompatible with the kingdom of God (5:21). And those who persist in such acts show that they do not belong to Christ and His kingdom. For, as Jesus Himself said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7: “By their fruit you will know them” (7:16, 20). As we continue to think about these things, I want to highlight very briefly three barriers to revival or spiritual vitality with which I think many of us struggle today.

1. WORLDLINESS

The first is worldliness. We might also call it carnal Christianity. The essence of it is to profess to be a follower of Christ, but in practice to live in a way that is indistinguishable from the unbelieving world, adopting the values of the world and seeking to gratify the selfish desires of the sinful nature. It is pledging your allegiance to Christ, but pursuing pleasure or prosperity or popularity more than holiness.

Jesus said we are to be in the world but not of the world. J. Wilbur Chapman put it this way: “It is not the ship in the water but the water in the ship that sinks it. So it is not the Christian in the world but the world in the Christian that constitutes the danger.”

It may be that there is too much of the world and its values and attitudes in us. And we may not even recognize it. In Peterson's words, we can become so well-adjusted to the culture that we fit into it without even thinking. And that's not good.

Richard Lovelace calls this problem “destructive enculturation.” He says that when our hearts are not full of God they become full of the world around us like a sponge full of clear water that has been squeezed empty and then thrown into a mud puddle.

Destructive enculturation means that we go along with the flow, assuming the music we listen to, the movies or TV shows we watch, the magazines or novels we read, and the off-color conversations in which some of us participate are harmless enough and won't have any negative effect on us. But inevitably the world gets in us, its values begin to shape us, and we get pulled along by the current of the culture. Unless we are living by the Spirit and keeping in step with Him.

Do you know what an entomologist is? An entomologist is an expert in the study of insects. There was a near-sighted professor of entomology whose students decided to play a practical joke on him. They took the body of one insect, the head of another, and the legs of yet another, and they glued them all together. Then they took the specimen to the professor for identification. They said: "What kind of bug is this?"

The professor examined the insect closely and finally said: "Gentlemen, this is a humbug!"

Sam Shoemaker said this bug is like a person whose heart belongs to Jesus, but whose head is run by the world and whose hands are too often engaged in evil. That is not the way it is supposed to be. "Humbug" is what it is.

A steelworker named Joe Gutierrez wrote a story called *Snow Danced in August* in which he describes a scene of silvery dust flakes that would often float to the floor in an area of the mill where steel strips rolled over pads in a tall cooling tower. For years, workers and visitors alike flocked to view the sight, which was especially picturesque at night.

Then they discovered the dust was asbestos. "Everybody breathed it," wrote Gutierrez, who now suffers from the slow, choking grip of asbestosis, as do many plant workers.

As Lee Eclov points out, there may be many things in our culture that resemble the silver flakes in that steel mill: Enchanting but deadly. Is there too much of the world in you? Has your heart been dazzled by something the world has to offer? Have you let something else squeeze God out of the place that belongs to Him and Him alone in your life?

If so, I urge you in the name of Jesus to repent. I urge you to turn away from the worldly passions and desires and pursuits that seem so enticing, and to turn back to the Lord Jesus. It is time to walk in step with the Holy Spirit, not with the world.

2. SPIRITUAL COMPLACENCY

The second barrier to revival and spiritual health I see is spiritual complacency. Many of us, I fear, have become too comfortable in our Christianity. We are too easily contented with our spiritual condition. Some of us have become spiritually lazy, and our spiritual health and vitality have suffered as a result.

The disciplines of the Christian life – such things as daily Bible reading and prayer – are called disciplines, because they are just that. They are privileges. But they are also disciplines. Disciplines require discipline! Disciplines require effort. They require commitment. But in keeping them there is great reward.

Some of us may have become complacent in our relationship with God. We may not be as consistent in our devotional life as we once were. We may not be as regular in our worship attendance as we used to be. Some of us may have gotten out of the habit of coming to Sunday School, or we've stopped bringing our kids to Sunday School. Some of us may be content to be spiritual consumers or spectators, taking in what we want without making ourselves available to be useful in God's service.

Sir Francis Drake, the famous explorer, once offered this prayer:

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little, when we arrive safely because we have sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the waters of life; having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity; and in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show Your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push into the future in strength, courage, hope and love.

Do you need a holy disturbance in your life? Spiritual complacency is sin. It grieves the heart of God. If your heart has become complacent, I urge you in the name of Jesus to repent and renew your heart's devotion to the Lord.

3. SPIRITUAL PRIDE

The third barrier to which I want to call your attention is the problem of spiritual pride. Another word for it is self-righteousness. C. S. Lewis, you may recall, said that pride is spiritual cancer. And cancer, we know, can be deadly.

Think of the story Jesus told in Luke 18 about two men who went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, a devoutly religious man. The other was a tax collector, a man who was a miserable sinner and knew he was a miserable sinner. While the tax collector cried out to God for mercy and forgiveness, the Pharisee proceeded to tell God what a virtuous and admirable guy he was. And it was OK with him if others listened in as he prayed. He said: "I thank You, God, that I am not like other men... or like this tax collector over here. Let me tell You, Lord, about all the good things I do."

That is spiritual pride. That is self-righteousness. It is comparing ourselves to other people and thinking we are better than they are. It is thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought (Romans 12:3). It is looking at other Christians or other denominations and saying: "I thank You, God, that I'm not like them."

Instead, what we should pray is: "Lord, have mercy on me. Have mercy on us all, for we are all sinners. And thank You, Lord, for having mercy on me. Thank You, Lord, for reaching down and touching me, an undeserving sinner, with Your forgiving grace."

Until we wake up and come to terms with the depths of our own sinfulness and the holiness of God, there is no hope of revival.

Spiritual pride is cancer of the soul. It must be ruthlessly rooted out and eradicated if we are to be spiritually strong and healthy in Christ.

Is that what you want? Do you want to be spiritually strong and healthy in Christ? I pray you do. You may be able to say: "By God's grace I am strong and healthy in Christ." If so, praise God! If you are not as spiritually strong and vibrant as God wants you to be, then examine your heart. Take time to evaluate the condition of your soul. And resolve in reliance on the Holy Spirit to rid yourself of every sin – whether it is worldliness or complacency or spiritual pride or any other sin – that has become a barrier to revival and the full measure of spiritual vitality God intends for you.

Lord, let it be so in us. To the glory of Your name. Amen.