

The *SBJT* Sermon: The Minister God Uses

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Billy Graham is the world's best-known evangelist. He has preached the gospel to more people than any person in Christian history. This sermon is an edited version of a message delivered in Alumni Chapel at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1982. All biblical quotations are taken from the *New International Version* unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

Tonight I want to take as my text the fifth chapter of Jeremiah beginning with verse one. Jeremiah 5:1-2 says, "Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem. Look around and consider. Search through her squares. If you can find but one person, one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city. Although they say, 'As surely as the Lord lives,' still they are swearing falsely." I wonder if today we understand the times, what we ought to be doing at this hour of history, what our ministry ought to be, and what types of people we ought to be.

I have come to know that my own work in ministry is not the most important in the world. It seems to me that God is building a great mosaic in his kingdom today. This mosaic is made up of all different branches of the Christian church. Baptists cannot say that we're the only people. I've found believers in the most unbelievable places. I've found true believers in our Lord Jesus Christ who have never heard that there is such a thing as the Baptist church. Now you may not believe that, but that's true. I told them in a part of Germany where everybody's Lutheran that I come from a part of the U.S. where nearly everybody's a Baptist. I told them there is a sign in a town in Texas that says, "Drive carefully or you may hit a Baptist." I told them we're the largest denomination in America outside of the Roman Catholic. Oh, they could hardly believe it since they live in a country where there are only four to five thou-

sand Baptists. But overseas three and four times more people attend the Baptist church than are *members* of the Baptist church because they are so evangelical, and so alive, and so evangelistic, and so dedicated. They don't mind services going four and five and six hours. You sit down after you've preached your heart out, and they say, "While he's catching his breath, and has a little sip of water, we'll sing a little bit, and he'll be back and preach another sermon." I've been in a lot of places like that. The most important work in the world is a man or a woman doing what God has called him or her to do and doing it faithfully.

Jeremiah once said, "The Word of the Lord came unto me saying, what do you see?" And Jeremiah said, "I see a boiling pot, tilting away from the north" (1:13). That's a perfect image to describe our world. It's an age shaken and convulsed by the greatest revolutions of all time. I know that Louisville was named after Louis the XVI of France. I remember reading about the mobs storming the Bastille in 1789 to start the French revolution. Louis XVI looked out the window and said, "This is a revolt!" Someone replied and said, "No sir, this is a revolution." Revolution is a mark of our age. We're not seeing isolated revolts throughout the world. We are seeing a total revolution.

Technologically, look what has happened in just a few short years. I remember the first computers we got in our office in Minneapolis. I thought they were marvels. Our first computers took up as much

space as three times the space the choir would take now. Today that same computer is about the size of your thumbnail, and can hold millions of names just on a little tiny chip. How rapidly we're moving! Our satellites can now see the rockets of Russia and can read the numbers on the rockets. *You can read their numbers.* You can see their tanks moving and read the numbers on the tank, and they can do the same with us. Nothing is hidden anymore.

Social revolution is taking place. We see it all through Latin America. The gap between the rich and the poor has got to be narrowed. Otherwise there is going to be a tremendous revolution in Latin America. *The Wall Street Journal* had a whole front section and then inside a whole page on the revolution in Latin America and the impact evangelicals are having on that revolution. *The New York Times Magazine* section this past Sunday had an article of several pages on the subject of how evangelicals are growing in Latin America and the impact they are having politically.

Then there's the religious revival we see. Until a few years ago you rarely heard of anything happening in Islam. Now they're in total revolt. They've got all that oil. They have all that money and they have all that zeal, and you see the Shiites, and the Sunnis, and other groupings within Islam. You see the mobs on television. You see the impact they are making in the world. I thought it was very interesting because the most closed country in the world to the gospel has been Afghanistan. Then suddenly they're invaded. Now there are two to three million refugees from Afghanistan in Pakistan and there are Christians working among them. Many of them have been converted to Jesus Christ.

So we don't know what God's doing. Who would have ever thought that all the old ancestor worship and everything would be destroyed and torn up by its roots in China in one generation? Today the World Council of Churches reckons they are three times more believers in China than when Mao came to power. All this and there have been no missionaries there. What happened? You see, there's no barrier on earth that can limit the Holy Spirit. There's no barrier on earth that can limit a person producing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, for against such there's no law. Nobody can keep you from loving someone or having joy in your heart.

We've all preached from the text in Ezekiel 22:30: "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land, but I found none." I wonder if God isn't looking for some men and women in this conference who will stand in the gap and make up the hedge at such an hour as this. It takes something to be that kind of a person. You read the life stories of some of the men that God called out, and you realize the price that they had to pay. God found a willing man in Isaiah. He found such a man in Paul. He found such a man in Luke, Wesley, Whitefield, and Moody.

I. The Minister God Uses Has Had an Experience with God

The first thing I'd like to say is that God is looking for a minister that has had an experience with God in Christ. John Wesley once said, "What a dreadful thing it would be for me if I should be ignorant of the power of the truth that I am preparing to proclaim." When I stood in Luther's pulpit a few weeks ago, and walked around the town of Wittenburg to

all the historical places where he had been, I couldn't help but be reminded of Luther's tremendous crisis and the torment that he went through before his conversion—his discouragements and his depressions. He knew he was accomplishing nothing; but he wrote this, "At last I began to understand the justice of God." He tried everything to find peace and fulfillment and joy in his life, and forgiveness of his sins, and the assurance of it. He'd gone to Rome and climbed those steps and kissed each one. He was a monk and a great preacher and a great theologian. But he said, "I didn't find forgiveness until I found that the just live by faith." And he said this, "'The just man shall live by faith.' At this I thought myself to have been born again and to have entered through open gates into paradise itself." That experience became the center of Luther's gospel that touched all of Europe and touches us today.

John Wesley was a missionary to Georgia. He became convinced that he lacked that faith whereby one is saved. On Wednesday, May 24, 1738, he said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." For the first time in his life, even though he had been a missionary, had belonged to the holy club at Oxford, and had lived a disciplined, holy life, Wesley found the assurance of Christ in his heart.

Not long ago we had our crusades in Poland. We had been invited first by the Baptists, and then they had been joined by all the other Protestant denominations. But these groups make up only about five percent of the total population of Poland. We didn't know what the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church was going to be, but when we arrived at the airport, a Bishop met us. He put his arms around me first and he said, "We welcome you to our

churches. Our churches are open to you." I didn't know what he meant. What he meant was the hierarchy had had a meeting and said, "We are going to support these crusades." They opened these huge cathedrals throughout Poland for us to hold our meetings. They were Baptist meetings, but they were in the Catholic cathedral and the Catholics felt free to come. The nuns and priests came, and the bishops came, and they entertained us beautifully. These great churches were packed and jammed with hundreds, and sometimes thousands waited in the streets.

On the first night I was sitting beside a monsignor who is the head of one of the largest theological seminaries in the Roman Catholic world. He told me an interesting story, and after I heard him tell it two or three times during my trip to Poland I asked him if I could tell it publicly. He said, "Of course, I'd be honored." He said, "I was getting my Ph.D. degree at the University of Chicago. One day I was riding on a bus and a black woman was sitting behind me and she punched me on the shoulder, and she said, 'I beg your pardon, sir, but have you ever been born again?'" He said, "Well, I'm a priest, I suppose so." She said, "That's not the question I asked you, sir. I asked you had you been born again." He said, "I went back to my room, I got down the Bible, turned to the third chapter of John, and reread the encounter that Jesus had with Nicodemus." He said, "I got on my knees. I had an experience with Christ that lives in my heart until this moment. I'm not sure that that was the moment of my rebirth because it goes against my theology." He said, "My head tells me one thing, but my heart tells me something else. The only thing I know is that I had been born again." I replied, "Praise God, that's

enough for me.”

I was preaching in Southern India, and met a bishop of the church of South India. He asked if he could see me. So I went to his home and had a little cup of tea. Then he asked the members of the family and the other guests if they'd mind if we had some time alone, and he took me back to a little room that he called the study and he burst into tears. He said, “Mr. Graham, I got my masters degree in theology at Cambridge.” “But,” he said, “I want to tell you, I am not sure that I know Jesus Christ as my Savior.” He said, “I'm a bishop of the church. I try to tell others, and lead others, and counsel others, but I myself am unsure.” Then he got on his knees like a little child and prayed the prayer of a sinner. He said, “I want to have one moment, one day that I can look back to and say that's where I made my commitment. Maybe that will help me.” I got a letter from him about a year later, and he said, “That did it; I now know.”

There are people who are in the ministry, even in the church as evangelists, who need to be saved. I've had at least—well, I won't tell you how many—evangelists that I have had the opportunity of talking to who were uncertain, really uncertain. Because of sin in their lives, they said, “If I am a man of God, why all these evil thoughts that just dominate my thinking? If I am a man of God, why don't I live like one? I don't have the strength to stand; I haven't found the secret in my own life.” Make sure that you know Christ. Don't be too proud to say to yourself in the loneliness of your room tonight, “Oh God, I preach to others but I myself am still a sinner in need of a Savior.”

II. The Minister God Uses Has Heeded a Call from God

Then the second thing: the minister God uses has heeded a call from God. The ministry must be a call, not a profession. I wouldn't do what I am doing right now without God's call. I've seen enough planes, enough airports, enough Holiday Inns and all the rest to last me all throughout eternity. God said, “Go ye into all the world.” I work not because of the need of the world. That's a part of it, of course, but I work because I'm commanded by the Commander-in-Chief to go and keep on going. The Lord revealed to me some years ago that he didn't just say, “Go ye until all the capitalist countries of the world and proclaim the gospel.” He said, “Go into all the world.” Go to the world of dictatorships, and the world of socialism, and all the other worlds and proclaim the gospel. So I decided that that's exactly what I was going to do and let the critics criticize and let the chips fall where they may. Just preach the gospel.

Jeremiah said, “His word was in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot” (Jer 20:9). Peter and John said, “For we cannot but speak the things which we've seen and heard” (Ac 4:20, KJV). Paul wrote, “Yea, woe is me if I preach not the gospel” (1 Co 9:16, KJV). My God calls in different ways. He called Moses through a burning bush; he called Saul in a blinding flash on the Damascus road. There are others, like Samuel, whom he called in the still small voice. Lloyd Ogilvie, who is the Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, said, “If we have a ministry only because we're in the ministry, then we do not have an authentic ministry.” I want to say that again. “If we have a ministry only because we're

in the ministry, then we do not have an authentic ministry.”

III. The Minister God Uses Leads a Holy and Disciplined Life

Then thirdly: the minister God uses will lead a holy and disciplined life. It takes a lot of discipline to be an evangelist, I want to tell you. I’ve had to turn down hundreds of hours of wonderful fellowship in order to get back to my room to get enough rest to get enough strength for the next sermon, or to study, to prepare, to write articles, or to write this, or to handle this, or to handle the other. It takes extreme discipline. I don’t say that I’m the most disciplined person in the world. Somebody asked George Whitefield, “Do you think that man’s a Christian?” He said, “I don’t know, ask his wife.”

Paul wrote, “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel” (1 Co 9:22-23). He told the Corinthians,

Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. (2 Co 4:1-2)

I read the other day that more than five thousand clergymen leave the ministry every year because of dysfunctional marriages. I don’t know whether that’s true or not. But I know this, that what I heard an old evangelist say years ago is true, that there are three things that trap an evangelist: pride, money, and morals.

Many times in a question and answer

period at a seminary, school, or press conference, I am asked, “How do you maintain your humility?” I respond, “First of all, I don’t have any, and secondly, God says to humble yourself.” That’s one of our jobs—to keep ourselves humbled before God and realize that our ministry is from God and that it’s His work. Salvation is of the Lord. I never say I lead anybody to Christ, for example, because too many factors went into that person coming to Christ. I was just one part of something that maybe led him to Christ. His salvation may have been due to a mother’s prayers over a period of years. It may have been a holy man of God from the pulpit in the church. It may have been a thousand other things.

Then there is money. I remember when we started our evangelistic crusades. Then evangelists lived by love offerings. Now that’s the only way some make a living. I know that. But our love offerings had gotten mighty big by 1950. When we left Atlanta, Georgia, after six weeks in the Ponce de Leon ball park, they gave us a huge offering. Cliff Barrows and I used to split the offering and give some to Bev Shea for singing, but at least forty to fifty percent of it was mine. They had a picture in the paper of a great big bag of money and a picture of me waving good-bye in a new convertible automobile. I never felt so sick in my life. I went to Dr. Jessie Bader, who was then the Secretary of Evangelism of the National Council of Churches (that was before they got as far as they did, whichever way you’re looking at it). I said, “Dr. Bader, this is a problem, what shall I do?” He said, “Billy, I’ve been praying for years that some evangelist would have the guts and the nerve to form a corporation and pay themselves a salary comparable to the salary of a pastor.” He continued,

“You’re going to get a lot of criticism, but if you’ll do it, you’ll make history.” So we sat down and that’s what we did. We formed a board of directors, and they paid us a published salary. I asked Dr. Bader, “What kind of salary ought we to have?” He said, “I think it would be fair if you got fifteen thousand dollars a year.” And that’s exactly what we got: fifteen thousand dollars a year and our expenses. Now that doesn’t sound like a great big salary today, but back then that was pretty big. Occasionally people would give us a suit of clothes or a new pair of shoes. I had at least one automobile given me in those days.

Learn to budget your family budget and live within that budget. Don’t put emphasis on money in the meetings. We decided that we would never devote more than three minutes per hour on television to our financial need. I have determined that if I ever have to stoop to begging for money on television, I’m going to quit evangelism, because the Lord knows the need and I believe he can lay it upon the hearts of people to give. One of the things I’ve been praying for and hoping for is that those who are on television will realize that just one person misusing it can hurt the whole cause. I love all those fellows that are on. I know most of them, though I don’t know them all. I know one fellow I wish I did have an opportunity to talk to because the other morning I watched him and he went from one end of the stage to the other; he kicked at everything and knocked a bowl of flowers off in his enthusiasm; and then he took the rest of the time to raise money for something that had nothing to do with his television program. Now that type of thing I’m not so sure is helpful. I’m not going to condemn him. Maybe God led

him to do that, but he’s not leading me to do that.

There is also the a matter of morals. F. B. Meyer once said, “Christ or self. To have the one we must be prepared to surrender the other. The heart schemes to hold both, but it does not deceive Christ.” Christ or self. We have to choose.

IV. The Minister God Uses Has a Systematic Devotional Life

Fourth, God’s minister must have a devotional life. I read a survey sometime ago that said ninety-three percent of seminary students in that particular denomination (it wasn’t the Southern Baptists) did not have a systematic devotional life. If I didn’t have a systematic devotional life I couldn’t go on. That’s the source of your power. It’s in your closet with God, in the study of the word, and in prayer. If our Lord Jesus had to spend all night in prayer, how much time do you think you and I have to spend in prayer? The prayers of Abraham and Jacob and Moses and Nehemiah and Daniel mark the turning point of history in their times. James said, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas 5:16, KJV). Mary Queen of Scots dreaded the prayers of John Knox more than the armies of ten thousand men. Does anybody dread your prayers or mine?

V. The Minister God Uses Has a Biblical Message

Fifth, God’s minister will have a biblical message. You see, God never changes. The nature of God has not changed in all the centuries. Also, man’s basic needs never change. When I stand in front of an audience in India, or Africa, or at a university in America, or here, I know there are certain needs present every time. I

know that there are people plagued with guilt, and I know there are people stricken with emptiness. I recently asked the president of Harvard University, "What is the greatest problem and the greatest need at Harvard University?" He thought a moment, and he said, "Emptiness and commitment." He said, "The students want to be committed to something but they don't know what. They need to be committed." That is true. I know that any time I stand before a group there is emptiness. I also know that there's the fear of death. The University of Louisville once took a survey to see what young people were thinking about most. Of course, the first thing was sex. Second, was death. I subscribe to a little magazine called *Song Hits*. It gives me the lyrics to all the rock music, and many of those songs have to do with suffering and death.

You can always stand in front of an audience and know that those things are working for you, and you can count on the work of the Holy Spirit. If you're faithful in proclaiming the gospel, I don't care how bad a preacher you are. If you're faithful in proclaiming the gospel, the Holy Spirit is going to bless because it's the gospel; it's the power of God unto salvation.

You don't have to water the gospel down and try to be "relevant." The day for relevance is finished. Lay it out there. Straight. Call hell, hell. Call the blood, the blood. And God will honor it.

Every time I've preached on the blood of Christ, he's honored it. Every time I have preached on the cross, he has honored it. I remember one night many years ago I was in Dallas, Texas, in the Cotton Bowl, and I'd preached my heart out. There were twenty-five or thirty thousand people present, but when I gave an invitation only a handful responded and I was

a little bit disappointed and dejected. I felt my message had failed. As I walked out there was a wonderful German who was visiting us. He was a great business man but he was also a great theologian. He put his arm around me, and I said, "John, what was wrong tonight?" He was always sensitive to the Holy Spirit. He said, "Billy, you didn't preach the cross." He said, "If you don't preach the cross and the resurrection, you've got no gospel." I never forgot that.

There are certain things that go into every evangelistic sermon, and I can never give an invitation until I feel that certain nails have been driven. The cross and the resurrection have to be there. The fact that God loves people has to be there. The fact of sin has to be there. There has to be an emphasis on conviction of sin and righteousness and judgment. The need to respond in repentance and faith must also be there.

You see, the pastor can use a shotgun, but the evangelist must use a rifle. The evangelist is always accused of preaching the same sermon over and over, and that's exactly what he ought to be doing. Not the same text, and the same illustrations, but the sermon ought to be the same because the gospel is the same if you're doing the work of an evangelist. You're preaching the gospel and there's only one gospel and it's good news. Don't ever be afraid of somebody saying your sermon was too simple. When they say it was too simple, that's a compliment. That's the way Jesus preached. He preached so that the children understood it.

I'll tell you a story. It was the last day of our meetings in London in 1954. At three o'clock in the afternoon we went to White City Stadium and there were seventy-five thousand people there. Then we

got in a big bus and went to Wembley Stadium. It was packed with a hundred and twenty-thousand people, with thousands outside that couldn't get in. On the platform sat the Archbishop of Canterbury. The royalty were up in the royal box. The lords and the ladies were there. All the press of Britain was there and the world was there, and I'd prepared just a simple little sermon on "Choose You This Day Whom You'll Serve." I said, "Oh Lord, there are all these people here, these types of people we didn't expect." I didn't expect the Archbishop there that day. The Lord said to me, "I gave you that message. You get up there and preach it." I got up and preached it. God honored it and blessed it and thousands came to Christ that day. Many of them today are leaders of the churches in England.

Preach the gospel with authority. Preach it with authority. Preach it with all the authority you possibly can. And personalize it. Preach it to a decision. You know I've often wondered, "What is an evangelist? What is his call? What is his gift?" I'm not a great preacher, and anybody who introduces me as a great preacher doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm not a great preacher. I think I am a communicator of a great message. But I think the call that I sense in my own heart is when I give that invitation. I can sense the presence and power of God in a way that I don't any other time. That's when the strength goes out of me. I can come and give a talk like this and I don't feel too tired afterward. But if I were preaching an evangelistic sermon and going to give an invitation for people to come to Christ, during those moments of the invitation something is going out of me. I feel it and sense it. I have never given an invitation but once in my life that I can

ever remember that no one came forward, and that was the first time I preached. Nobody came. I didn't expect them anyway, and I don't blame them, after they heard what I said.

VI. The Minister God Uses Has a Sensitive Social Conscience

Sixth, God's minister must have a compassionate and sensitive social conscience. Now, I had to go on a pilgrimage in this area. In 1952 we held a crusade in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I was at that time president of a college in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and I would go out and hold these crusades. We built a big tabernacle, and I saw workers putting up some ropes. I knew that black people were going to have to sit behind those ropes, and I went and talked to the ushers and asked them if they would remove the ropes. The ushers said, "No, that's our custom." I just reached in myself and I took down all those ropes, and I said I'll never preach to a segregated audience again.

Did I take a licking! You should have read the letters and seen the threats that we got and all the rest of it, but we never looked back. It became a pilgrimage. Two or three years later I wrote an article for *Reader's Digest* entitled, "The Most Segregated Hour of the Week." Then I wrote ten thousand words on the subject for *Life Magazine*. I'm sure you've got them here in your library. I was asked at Harvard a few weeks ago, "Why don't you speak against apartheid?" I looked at that girl that asked the question (she asked it real loud). I said, "You know to stand here at Harvard and talk against apartheid is easy." I said, "Try going to South Africa, and saying it in South Africa in front of the television cameras and all the newspapers, and all the people. That's what I did." She sat

down and didn't say anymore.

Then there is the question of peace. The Lord spoke to me about five years ago after I had a briefing from the Pentagon. I saw all the missiles lined up from the Soviet Union, all the missiles lined up from China, and all the missiles lined up from the United States, and what each one could do. I said, "My Lord. We could blow the world up in a matter of minutes." If the Christian doesn't have a message here, he doesn't have a message. I don't believe the United States ought to disarm. I'm not a pacifist. I think we ought to fight to defend our freedom. But I'll tell you we've entered a new period of history. Whether we like it or not, we're living on the same planet with these other people. Let's have some sort of an agreement to destroy all these weapons of mass destruction. Just destroy them. But how are we going to do it when fifteen countries now have the atomic bomb?

Knowing the human heart as we know it from the Bible, the probability of peace in this century is not too good. So that brings us back to the text of this morning. Time is short. I'm praying for peace, working for peace, and I'm going to make speeches about peace. But even when we've done all of that, the only hope for permanent peace is when the Prince of Peace comes. Peace will come when the Lord Jesus Christ sets up His Kingdom. We pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth," and it's going to be done. That prayer is going to be answered. Until then we evangelists ought to set an example by our love, by our compassion, and by helping people that are less fortunate. We must call for peace, for the lifting of oppression throughout the world, and for human rights. I think that's a part of our ministry in the modern day and a part of what Paul called, "Becoming all things to

all men." Such preaching will be used of God to get the ear of people you normally will not win to the gospel.