

# “The Necessity of Christmas”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

December 26, 2004

Text: “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sin” (Matthew 1:21).

Some years ago Dr. Karl Menninger, a distinguished psychiatrist, wrote a book, entitled *Whatever Became of Sin*. The book was born out of his private practice with a group of patients who could identify a host of complaints including anxiety, fear, depression, guilt and shame, but they could not identify any relationship between some of what they were experiencing and their religious faith. Menninger concluded that one of the problems in our modern world is that we have lost the notion of sin. We have lost the sense that there is something profoundly wrong in the human condition and because we cannot acknowledge the illness, we are exempted from the cure.

## I.

When the Gospel of Matthew announces the birth of Jesus Christ, it does so in terms of Joseph, the father of Jesus. Matthew tells us that when Joseph was engaged to be married to Mary, he found that Mary was pregnant, and knowing that he was not the father, Joseph was determined to put her away quietly so as to avoid any scandal. But an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to tell him that the child Mary was bearing was of the Holy Spirit. Then the angel told

Joseph, "She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The message of Christmas is not a sentimental message that is designed to bring about good religious feelings. It is far more powerful than that. It is a message that says to us that apart from the birth of the Jesus Christ we are a people that are lost in every respect.

Paul Tillich in his book, *The Shaking of the Foundations* defines, "sin" not as an act, but as a condition. It is a state of separation. We are separated from God, our fellow men and women, and even from ourselves.

That is why the birth of Jesus is as much a scandal today as it was two thousand years ago. We live in a society that is so exclusively committed to inclusivity, so intolerantly committed to intolerance, and so committed offensively to not being offensive that it can only welcome Jesus into the world to the extent that he is thought of as being one way among many ways, as personal truth but not as absolute truth. The great offense of Christmas to a modern world is its insistence that Jesus is the Son of God and that God is the Father of Jesus Christ. This clarity--this exclusivity--is what Christmas is all about. Jesus is not one way among many ways. He is "the way, the truth, and the life."

That is why if we are to understand the meaning of Christmas, we are first going to have to understand the power of sin.

## II.

In the first place, an understanding of the pervasive nature of sin adds depth to our understanding of the social problems we face today. Several weeks ago one of our county commissioners made a stir in our community by referring to the urban blacks of our community as living in a "moral sewer."

Now all of us can appreciate the terrible struggles that take place in our inner cities. Crime and drugs are rampant. Illegitimacy and divorce have fractured the family structures that are essential to all communities.

But these problems are not limited to one location or one group of people. They affect all persons in all neighborhoods. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," writes Paul to the church at Rome. Not all of the problems of the world can be solved by education, wealth, and medical care. No matter how hard we try to eradicate poverty, illiteracy, and a host of other social ills, we will ultimately fail if we do not understand that behind all outward evils there is a need in human nature that only a profound spiritual renewal can meet. That is true not only of blind Bartimaeus begging by the roadside but also of Zaccheus in his counting house and Dives in his palace. It is true not only of a coarse woman of Samaria coming to the well to draw water; it is true of Nicodemus in his study, needing to be reborn.

Coming face to face with this tragic fact about human nature is not the beginning of discouragement but hope. The New Testament understands it. "Even when we were dead to our sins," Paul writes. He understands this tragic fact of human existence. That is where he starts. But then he speaks of the saving power of Christ to redeem individuals until they were no longer a part of the problem but part of the solution. The New Testament starts with the darkness of the world into which Christ was born. Then it affirms the light that has shined into Jesus Christ. He is the Savior of the world.

### III.

Then, too, it is only when we acknowledge the reality of sin in our own lives that we see ourselves as we really are. So often we see the darkness in the lives of other people, but we are blind to the darkness that lives in us. There is a story in the ancient church of a religious hermit who was so holy and righteous that the evil spirits that were sent to tempt him could not overcome his great faith. They tried the passions of the body and failed, the doubts of the minds, but that too was not successful. Then Satan himself came and spoke to the evil spirits saying, "Your methods are too crude. Let me have a go at him." So Satan went to visit this holy hermit who lived by himself in the desert and said to him, "Have you heard the good news? Your brother has been made Bishop of Alexandria." That got the poor hermit. Here he was living in poverty and destitution and his brother was the Bishop of Alexandria. Jealousy swept over him like a flood. He could stand almost anything except the success of his brother. What I am saying is that no person can understand himself until he comes to grips with the darkness that is inside all of us.

You see, sometimes we deceive ourselves. Sometimes sin is crude and terrible. It staggers down the street; it blasphemes with oaths that can be heard; it wallows in vice unmentionable. Then prosperity visits sin. It moves to a finer residence. It changes all its clothes. It is no longer indecent or obscene; its speech is mild. Its civility is irreproachable. But at its heart it is the same self-indulgent, callous, envious, unclean reality it has always been.

The tragedy of sin is that it is rarely an individual matter. It inevitably affects other people. For selfishness, cruelty, and apathy are not individual. They roll from generation to generation, spoiling the lives of other people. All the great literary giants have known this. Start with the great Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus and think your way through Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, Faust, Les Miserables, The Scarlet Letter, and Anna Karenina.

The recognition of this truth is at the very heart of the gospel. But instead of being a source of discouragement, it is a source of hope. This is what the New Testament is all about, trying to get each one of us to take a serious view of himself and then seeking a cure for the malady that effects us all. Go through this highly respectable congregation and see how it is true. For some have sinned secretly and are afraid of being found out. Some have done things they regret deeply and cannot forgive themselves. Some had done things that they thought were private, but now they see how their actions effect others around them.

Every person here knows what I am talking about. It is not Greek to anyone. No one can possibly understand the necessity of Christmas until he or she comes to grips with the fundamental reality that Christ has come into the world to save you and me from the terrible grip of sin.

Paul Tillich has observed that two of the most important words in the vocabulary of faith are the words “sin” and “grace.” Sin is the separation that we experience from God, from others and from ourselves. We cannot fully understand “sin” without understanding “grace,” for the two are inseparably bound. We do not have knowledge of “sin” unless we have already experienced the unity of life, which is “grace.”

The Apostle Paul understood the power of sin in his own life. “The good that I wish to do,” he wrote to the church in Rome, “I do not do. And the evil that I do not wish to do, I do.” But Paul understood something even more important than sin. “Where sin abounded,” he wrote, “grace abounded even more.” He wrote these words, not to be sentimental, but because in the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found himself accepted, he was able to accept himself, and to be reconciled to others. The moment in which grace struck him and overwhelmed him, he was reunited with that to which he belonged, and from which he was estranged.

That is what we mean by grace. Sometimes it strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. Sometimes it strikes us when our lives seem without meaning. Sometimes it strikes us when our own indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction have become intolerable to us. Sometimes at our moments of greatest darkness there is a voice that says, “You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you.” If that happens to us, we experience grace. We may not be better than before, but we are transformed.

Today, we find ourselves in great need of the power that only God can bring in Christ. We are living in a troubled world, where poverty and war, hopeless and despair affect almost every place we look.

It is for this reason that Christ was born. He alone is the “light of the world.” In these terrible days especially we should not be content with formal religion. Saviorhood is the essence of Christ, and to face our deepest needs in earnest, to repent sincerely and to seek God’s forgiveness and power, to take seriously the one who for our sakes suffered that he might bring us to God--that is the meaning of Christmas. And that is what we celebrate today.

Amen