



“CONSIDER *Your* CALL” Sample Sermon

## TO BE CHOSEN AND SENT

John 1: 1-5, 10-14, 16

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Tommy McDearis  
Pastor, Blacksburg Baptist Church

One of the great preachers and storytellers of our time is Dr. Fred Craddock, and one of the stories he loves to tell is a true story that occurred about a decade ago in a rural church in the North Georgia mountains.

One Sunday this mountain pastor went to his church and he delivered what he thought was a pretty good sermon. When the worship service was over, just as he always did, he spoke the words of benediction and he went to the door to shake hands with his congregation as they left. But on this particular morning there was a well dressed, sophisticated, well-educated man from Atlanta visiting the church, and as soon as Rev. Brown reached the door this man pushed his way to the pastor. With a stunned look on his face and tears welling in his eyes, he reached out, he took the pastor's hand and he said, “Rev. Brown, God spoke to me this morning like I've never been spoken to in my life. That was the most amazing experience I've ever had, and I want you to know that I'm going back to Atlanta, I'm going to quit my job, and I'm going to give my life to God's service. I don't know where God will take me, but wherever He leads, I'll go!”

What would you have said if you had been in Rev. Brown's shoes? I suppose most of us ministers assume we would have said, “Praise the Lord! That's wonderful! God bless you! You'll never be sorry about the decision you've made here today.” However, my guess is that Rev. Brown was probably more honest than some of us. Instead of saying what most of us hope and think we would have said, Rev. Brown looked at the man and he said, “Good grief, mister, it's just a sermon! Go home, sit down, have a glass of tea and think about this for a while. Things may look different to you by tomorrow. Don't jump into anything. Just chill out and think this thing through!”

But when he did, this man looked at Rev. Brown and he said, “No, you don't understand. God's Word spoke to me today and I *have* to do this! I know this is what God wants me to do and I'm going to do it!”

Then the man thanked Rev. Brown, he gave him a hug, and he went out to a whole, new life!

That afternoon when Rev. Brown started thinking about how this man had reacted to that sermon it occurred to him that sometimes those of us in the ministry spend so much time with the Word of God that we tend to forget how much *power* it has! We tend to forget how utterly radical the Word of God really is when you get in the Word instead of just standing with the Word! And unfortunately, that is not only true for ministers but its also true for a lot of people who have grown up in church.

For instance, if you grew up in the church like I did, it may occur to you, as you get older that the “Word of God” was an “old friend” long before you really got to know it! And that isn't bad ... unless you have a tendency to take old friends for granted. And let's face it; most of us do!

Too often with the passing of time we humans tend to take even our closest friendships for granted. It's not that we mean to do this. We just get busy. And when life gets busy the easiest things to put off are the things we've known the longest!

When life begins to press in on us we begin to simply assume those "old friends" will always be there no matter what. When we do we often find ourselves spending less and less time cultivating those truly special friendships that we think we would not trade for anything. But life gets harsh and heavy sometimes, and when it does, we sometimes find ourselves taking our oldest and dearest friends for granted, forgetting in the process how life-giving and life-enriching those old friendships can be.

When the Word of God becomes an "old friend" it is all too easy to start taking it for granted. When we do we almost always begin to forget how much power that "old friend" has! We tend to forget that God's Word has within it the power that creates life! Too often as time passes and as faith becomes "routine," we can easily forget how earth-shattering the Word of God truly is.

Not long ago at a regional missions meeting I sat gripped by sheer boredom as I listened to the guest speaker read the scripture with all the enthusiasm of a 90-year-old accountant reading the tax code. I wondered, "Oh, my Lord, do we all sound like this?" I wondered if all we "lifers" read the scripture as if it were boring, as if it were nothing to be excited about at all. I wondered if this Book of Life had become such an "old friend" that it was not just another "document" rather than "God's Word," the Word of life itself.

Think about it. Those of us who are Christian parents give our children Bibles as gifts without ever giving the slightest consideration to the possibility that the words contained in the extraordinary book might completely change their lives forever!

Or even more, we parents give our children Bibles without it ever occurring to us that the message contained in this book might lead our children to do things we are afraid of! It might lead them to take huge risks! It might lead them to do things that would seem foolish when compared to the values of the rest of the world.

No, it's actually worse than this. Most Christians give their kids Bibles with no expectation at all that their kids will even read them. I mean, why should they expect their kids to read them? Most Christian parents don't read the Bible themselves! They aren't worried about how reading the Bible might bring out some form of radical commitment in their children. Why should they? Many fine, church-going parents have no idea how radical the Word of God is! They don't give their kids Bibles because they're praying to radical commitment. They give their kids Bibles because they figure it is nice to have one, and who knows? Their son or daughter might need to decorate a coffee table with it someday.

Lots of Christian parents give their kids Bibles for one holiday or the other. And I'm telling you, my friends, that's a dangerous thing to do because there is *power* in the Holy Word of God!

The *Word* that created the universe, the *Word* that became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth, the *Word* that called the prophet Jeremiah to service, the *Word* that healed the sick, raised the dead, and made the blind to see, the *Word* that loved prostitutes and sinners as a parent loves a child, the *Word* that empowered a small band of uneducated, lifeless, frightened men and women to become the catalysts for the greatest force of change the world has ever known ... that Word is still alive in this world! And it is still shaking people's lives. It is still changing things and changing people in ways too radical to imagine.

I'm telling you ... when the hot Word of God comes pouring itself upon the ice-sheeted souls of a cold, cold world, things change! And when it does, it reshapes everything it touches. It causes people to *do* things and *be* things they never imagined they could do or be.

That's the point John was trying to make in the first chapter of his beloved gospel.

In John 1:1-5, John said, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing was made that was made. What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of the world. And the light shined in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it."

When John wrote those words he wasn't just referring to words on a page. When the Hebrews spoke of the "Word" of God they were referring to the very essence of God.

The “Word” was the *power* of God. It was the strength of God.

The “Word” was the *Spirit* of God that called people out and it empowered them for life! It called out the faithful and it separated them out for service to the world. It called people to be the change agents of the world.

That’s what John was trying to communicate in his gospel. God spoke and the world was born. *Life* was born!

That’s power, friends! Things change when the Word comes to us. People are different when the Word comes to them.

When God’s love, God’s joy, God’s grace, God’s spirit ... when God’s *call* is born to our souls we become alive to possibilities that we never dreamed of before. We become excited about things that we never considered before. Suddenly the world becomes one big “YES!” And even when those possibilities are frightening, still there is within our hearts a voice that tells us ... that assures us ... that our lives will never be complete until we are following the path God is charting for us in His mind.

Think for a moment of Jeremiah. So many times I have heard Jeremiah described as “a crotchety old prophet,” but that wasn’t true. When the Word of God started calling to Jeremiah he wasn’t old! He was “only a boy.” He was no more than a young teenager!

God came to Jeremiah and he said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

And what was Jeremiah’s response to God’s call? Jeremiah 1:6 says, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

Jeremiah wasn’t old and crotchety. He young and scared! He was only a boy! But still the Word of God came to Jeremiah and he called Jeremiah to go as a prophet to all the “grown-ups” of Israel because he needed this “kid” to speak the Word of God to a wayward nation. God wanted to save Israel and for some reason God thought this little boy was the best person in the land to do this job.

If you had been a teenager and God has started calling you to preach to all the “grown-ups,” wouldn’t you have been scared? I was!

I was 16 years old when I accepted Jesus Christ into my life. Oh, I had gone to church since the month I was born. I had even done the old “Baptist boogie” when I was nine years old. I walked down the aisle of the church with all the other kids at the close of an emotional revival service, and a week later I was baptized. But real faith, heart-warming faith, came to me as a gift from God when I was 16.

It was truly a life-changing experience for me. It is no exaggeration to say that all seemed right with the world in the year that followed that afternoon in May of 1973! But then when I was 17 I began to have this strange uneasiness that wouldn’t leave me. Though I couldn’t put a name to it, I could only describe it as “a constancy,” almost like an internal itch that couldn’t be scratched. It is too negative to call it a nagging. In hindsight it was what the prophet Isaiah called “a still, small voice” that was calling from within me. But I must say that even though it wasn’t a nagging, it wasn’t totally pleasant either.

In my senior year in high school I became the student leader of a countywide youth revival called, “Celebrate Youth.” Most of the churches were involved. In the process of developing this event alongside several local pastors I found myself enthralled by the mission. I had never done anything more rewarding up to that time.

It was a major undertaking that looked hopeless for a while. Too few workers, too little support, and too little money all worked to give this mission an air of failure before it even began. However, as the day of the kick-off drew near it started to appear that somehow this would be a successful event. In fact, it was going to be the first of three “centering moments” in my pilgrimage to God’s ministry.

On the day before “Celebrate Youth” began, I was unloading folding chairs at the local armory. Suddenly, as I was setting up those chairs I heard myself say, “I could do this for the rest of my life!”

I hate unloading folding chairs, especially in the humid Georgia heat! How could that be something rewarding? Yet, here I was experiencing the most content moment in my life in a hot National Guard Armory setting up folding chairs for a Christian mission. As long as I live I will never forget that moment.

A few weeks later I went to my pastor, Dr. John Allen, and I told him about this “uneasiness” that I had been experiencing. As I described this feeling of internal spiritual turmoil and that moment of joy I had experienced through the youth festival, John looked at me and he said rather matter-of-factly, “Tommy, this is simple. God’s calling you to the ministry.”

“Say what?”

“God’s calling you to the ministry ... and you know it. You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t.”

I was terrified. For me, ministry meant preaching and I had always been terrified of public speaking. As a kid I used to beg my teachers to let me make oral reports to them in private because standing in front of a group was such a miserable experience for me. I couldn’t imagine standing before a church to preach.

About a week later Dr. Allen called me on the phone and he said, “Tommy, I’m the chaplain of the county jail and I can’t go there to preach next Sunday. I need you to do it.”

I said, “Are you crazy? I’ve never preached in my life. I can’t do that, and I certainly can’t do it at the jail!”

John said, “God’s calling you, I need your help, and I’ve always tried to help you when you needed it. Now are going to help God and me or not?”

With a very heavy and terrified heart I said, “OK, I’ll try.”

Seven days later I went to the jail in sheer terror and when sermon time came I read a few verses of scripture and I told my story of faith. Much to my surprise it went fairly well, and more to my surprise, a young man called me over to his cell after I had finished and he said, “Preacher, I got arrested last week ... for killing a man ... and I did it! I’m guilty. Preacher, I’m not asking you to go to court with me or to try to get me off. All I want to know is ... do you think God will forgive me?”

No one had ever called me preacher before, and no one had ever asked me a question like that before. But I told him about God’s forgiveness, I prayed with him, he asked Christ into his heart, and I left that jail more scared than ever! That afternoon Dr. Allen called me and he asked me how things had gone. I told him what had happened and he said, “Well, I’m glad to hear it because I want you to preach at church next Sunday night.”

I said, “No, I cannot do that! I’m just 18 years old, John. I’m not ready for something like that! And besides, I’m scared to death of public speaking. I can’t do this.”

John laughed and he said, “Yeah, isn’t it just like God to call you to do the one thing that scares you the most? But don’t worry, Tommy. God won’t send you His Word without giving you the strength to speak it.”

John said, “Let me know what your scripture is going to be so I can put it in the bulletin, and before you go to bed, read Jeremiah 1:6-8.” Then he hung up!

I walked over, I opened my Bible, and I looked up Jeremiah, and I read, “Ah, Lord God, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

For a week I prayed, sweated, fretted, cried and griped, but when Sunday night came I showed up for church. As the crowd started showing up I was sitting on the front pew staring at the cross that hung over the baptistry, praying as if I were a condemned man headed to the gallows, every bit as terrified as I thought I would be. But then, just as the special music was ending prior to my sermon, I said, “Lord, if this is what you want, I’ll try.” Just as my cousin Charles finished singing the last words of the most beautiful arrangement of *Amazing Grace* I’ve ever heard, I suddenly realized that I wasn’t in the least bit frightened anymore. It truly felt like a side-by-side refrigerator had been lifted off my chest. I walked to the pulpit, I read my scripture, I delivered what I’m sure was a poor sermon in terms of content since I didn’t have a clue what I was doing ... and yet, when I left that pulpit that night, I knew I had found my bliss!

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify and enjoy God forever!” Even though at that point I had never heard of that catechism, that night I discovered the joy that comes with giving your life to Christ’s service. And I understood for the first time that I would never know the full extent of God’s joy until I gave my life to the work God was planning for me

A youth revival, a devotional at the county jail, and a Sunday night sermon: those became the triad of experiences that brought me my centering moment! I knew I was called by God to carry his Word. My pastor told me so and God proved it was true.

It's an amazing thing to be called of God. And the most interesting part is that God's call can come in so many ways. For me it began with "a constancy," a still small voice speaking to my heart. That call was then articulated into words I could understand through a loving and straightforward pastor who recognized the work of the Holy Spirit when he saw it. John Allen had the guts and the faith to challenge my fear and to call out my call. And then my call was confirmed through a series of "opportunities" that turned into "God's Word" to me.

God isn't through calling people! He's still calling the faithful to carry the Word and to find their bliss in the process. The question is not, "Is God calling?" The question is, "How do we recognize the call when it comes?"

Well, if you really want to find out what God wants you to do in life, I suggest you ...

1. Start by listening! Listen for the voice that will speak within you. Listen to your minister when he/she speaks the Word. Study God's written Word and listen to what it is saying to you. Don't read the Bible as if it were some dime store novel that doesn't mean anything. Read it expectantly ... as if you expect to hear a radical, life-changing, life-shaping message from the words on its pages. Then listen to what others are saying to you. Listen to what God's "Word" is saying to you through circumstances and the people in life.
2. Claim your uniqueness! There truly is something you can do in God's kingdom that no one else can do in exactly the same way you can do it! You are one of a kind. You have gifts, experiences, hurts, pains and joys no one else has! And God can and will take those and he will use them as tools for producing new life if you will claim the gift God made in you!
3. Be open to change! Don't ever believe that you must be what you have been ... that your past mistakes, sins, insecurities or fears will be the only definition of life that you will ever have. Satan and the world around you will try to convince you to settle for less than the joy God has planned for you ... less than the joy God's call will give you. Do not settle for less than the best! Be open to change, believe in God's power to change you ... to change life through you! Your life ... my life ... will always be changing if we're walking in the light of God love, God's will and God's call. God's "Word" changes things! Let it begin with you!
4. Be open to God's possibilities! Don't be discouraged by the fact that you're not a professional, that you haven't been to seminary, that you haven't been ordained, that you're too young, too old, too weak, too ... whatever! Jesus said, "With men it is impossible. But with God all things are possible!" Our God is a God of unlimited possibilities ... and neither you nor I are the exceptions to that rule! Claim them and don't be afraid to change your plan if God has a different one from yours! Believe me, His will be the light that shines in the darkness!

Twenty-eight years ago a voice started calling to me. It was a voice I didn't understand at first. I'm not totally sure I always "understand" that voice all the time now. But this I know: those words brought me the joy of life! I found meaning and purpose in life that I know I could have found nowhere else. And the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us 2000 years ago is still dwelling with us today. It's calling us to bring light to the darkness.

May all of us discover lives that really count for good today, and may we never know a day when God's Word is not real to us ... forever!