

A lawyer was trying to console a weeping widow. Her husband had passed away without a will. *"Did the deceased have any last words?"* asked the lawyer. *"You mean RIGHT before he died?"* sobbed the widow. *"Yes,"* replied the lawyer. *"They might be helpful if it's not too painful for you to recall."* *"Well,"* she began, *"As I remember it, he said, don't try to scare me! You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with that gun."*

**There have been many collections made of the last words of well-known persons.** I ran across a collection of last words recently from people who are not that well-known. For example, murderer Richard Loeb was a trifle optimistic about his survival after being stabbed 56 times by a fellow convict in 1936: *"I think I'm going to make it!"* he said. William Palmer, who was hanged in 1856, was told to step on the scaffold's trap door. *"Is it safe?"* he asked. Now that's a great question. Finally, Phineas T. Barnum, the outrageous showman, asked a question with his last words: *"How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?"* he asked. A Business man right up until the end!!

**You would think that people confronted with their last few moments on earth would want to say something memorable something important something lasting.**

Consider Jesus' last words, as recorded in our lesson from Luke's Gospel. **Luke tells us Jesus opened his disciples' minds to understand the scriptures, and then said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high."**

**These were Jesus' last words.** These were undoubtedly words that Christ meant for his disciples to remember. These were words that summed up his mission and theirs. It is interesting what part of his ministry he chose to emphasize with these last words.

**Without this passage, we might assume that his final message to his disciples would be, LOVE ONE ANOTHER.** We talk about the love of Christ nearly every Sunday in one way or another. Obviously, no one loved like Jesus. **And he taught love as the central way of life. But that was not the message he centered on in his last instructions to the church. And this is critical.** If we preach only the love of Christ, people might think that the Gospel is a touchy-feely "everybody have a warm feeling about everybody else" kind of message with no real power to transform lives. No, love is at the center of our message, but it is not the complete message. **THERE IS SOMETHING MORE!!**

**Jesus said, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS should be preached in his name to all nations, . . ." Here is the message that we are to proclaim in the world: REPENT & RECEIVE GOD'S FORGIVENESS.**

**Let me repeat this. This is the central task of the church to say to people, REPENT & RECEIVE FORGIVENESS.**

At the beginning of the New Testament we encounter *John the Baptist preaching a message of repentance.* It is a very stark message, an unrelenting message. **We would like to paint a contrast between John and Jesus.** John was a rough-hewn backwoodsman, while Jesus was a more urbane Rabbi. **John was hard; Jesus was soft.** *John preached repentance; Jesus preached grace.* The historical evidence does not support such a position, however. Jesus in his teaching was just as demanding sometimes even more demanding than John. *It was at his baptism that Jesus identified himself with John's message of repentance. It was a consistent theme throughout his ministry.*

**BUT HE ALSO PREACHED "FORGIVENESS."** In fact, he was BOLD enough to say to one man, *"Your sins ARE forgiven."* That really steamed the temple crowd that he should claim authority to forgive sins. But that was the second part of his overall message: Repent and receive forgiveness for your sins. **And this is the central message that we as the church are to proclaim to the world: Repent and receive God's forgiveness.** However, since these two

words repentance and forgiveness have lost much of their power to modern men and women, **let's phrase them in a different way. Let's begin with "REPENTANCE."**

**The first message we proclaim from Christ is this: IN WHAT DIRECTION IS YOUR LIFE HEADED?**

That is, everyone's life has a direction and sometimes that direction is not desirable. For example, from time to time we encounter someone who is becoming more bitter with every day that passes. You've known people like that. Somewhere along the way something has caused them to sour on life. And rather than seeing the folly of such a depressing attitude rather than acknowledging that they ought to do something about their outlook before it drives everyone away from them they seem to nurture that negative attitude and ever more tightly it pulls them into its grasp. *We want to say to such a person, "Turn around! Turn around before it is too late."*

We see people abusing these wonderful bodies that God has given each of us with cigarettes, with alcohol or drugs, or with simple gluttony or neglect, and we want to say, *"Turn around. Turn around while you still can."*

A man finds himself being drawn into a relationship that is destructive to his happy home. He is on a path that will certainly mean heartache for himself, for his wife and children, even for his partner in sin, and we want to shout, *"For God's sake, man, turn around! Before it is too late, turn around."*

We see people who, lacking any other great motivation in life, begin surrounding themselves with things, at the expense of living a life of service and we want to say, "Turn around. You are serving things rather than allowing things to serve you. For your own spiritual welfare, turn around." You see, the message of repentance is not the exclusive domain of murderers and prostitutes. All of us need to examine our lives from time to time and ask the question, "Where am I headed in life? If I continue in the direction I'm headed, will it take me where God means for me to be?"

Daniel Defoe, the author of ROBINSON CRUSOE, ran away from home and went to sea as a young man. His father protested young Defoe's plans, and his mother wept. But Defoe was determined to have his way. On his very first voyage out, his ship was wrecked and young Defoe barely escaped with his life. He saw his foolishness and the bad choice he had made, but he was afraid to go back home because he knew his friends would make fun of him. From his experience, Defoe learned *that people are not ashamed of sin, but they are ashamed to repent.*

*That's an interesting thought. We are more ashamed of CHANGING DIRECTIONS than we are CONTINUING IN OUR SIN.* Studies in psychology show that once we have decided on a course of action particularly an UNSURE COURSE, we will build up all kinds of rationalizations to justify that course of action. And the more others point out our fault, the more we feel the need to justify our unusual behavior. Our pride becomes involved and in a most demonic twist of thinking, we harden in our justifications until we get to the point that we will fight rather than switch even when we know what we are doing is stupid beyond belief.

When we find ourselves in a "TWISTED POSITION" unable to make a decision, a message comes from Christ and from those who love us, *"Turn around. Please, for your own sake and for the sake of those who love you most, turn around."* Has anyone ever heard those words before? Have you ever been tempted to speak them to someone else? We all need to hear them from time to time. **That's the first message Christ has for us. Repent turn around.**

**Here is the second: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR LIFE THUS FAR?** Do you have any regrets? Do you look back over your life and wish you had done some things differently? Most people's lives have a secret here or there. Most of us have some part of our lives we wouldn't particularly want to share with our children or our spouse or our parents. Most of us can look at our lives and say, "Gee, I didn't handle that relationship quite like I should" or "I wish I hadn't said THAT" or "I wish I had spent more time here and less time over there" or "If only I could go back and live THAT PART of my life over again." **YES, WE ALL HAVE REGRETS--WE ALL NEED TO KNOW WE CAN BE FORGIVEN AND "TURN OUR LIVES AROUND."**

Pastor Gregory Schmidt of Shelton, Connecticut tells of watching a TV news show, like "A Current Affair." On that show he saw a report that he says has led him to contemplate changing the focus of his ministry. The story was about a woman who ran a 900-phone service called "The Confession Line." The "confessions" which people made included

anything and everything, from admissions of petty theft to adultery and even to murder. The woman explained that she had been operating for just under a year and the 25 lines she had were busy 24 hours a day. The woman went on to say that The Confession Line was such a success she was expanding to 100 lines in order to keep up with the demand. Finally, and this is the part that got Rev. Schmidt's mind racing, she admitted that in the first year of operation The Confession Line made close to 17 million dollars.

Wow! Maybe we ought to see about a 900 number for our church. But here is what this phenomenon is really all about: **We all have things in our lives we need to confess.** Unresolved guilt is one of the great problems in people's lives. It manifests itself in physical disorders, sleeplessness, depression, and numerous problems in building relationships. And most of us are not even aware that it is a problem. Because we are confused about the nature of sin, we aren't aware of our need for forgiveness. Sin is any brokenness in our lives. It is any transgression against the love of someone else or the love of God. Sin manifests itself anytime we have used another person or when we have not lived up to our full potential as children of God. *All of us have regrets about the way we have lived our lives, and I am able to say to you on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ, "You are forgiven. The past is past. It is gone forever. Today is a new day and you can be a new person. You don't have to live out that old self-defeating script anymore. You are forgiven."*

**Those, then, are the two messages Jesus means for his church to proclaim to the world, "TURN AROUND" and "YOU ARE FORGIVEN. THE PAST IS PAST. THIS IS A NEW DAY!"**

According to writer Jamie Buckingham, the day after Jimmy Swaggart, one of the nation's best-known TV evangelists, went on public television to confess his sin of immorality and ask the nation's forgiveness, a friend of Jamie's called him on the phone.

"Do you want to know what God thinks of Jimmy Swaggart?" the friend asked. Jamie told him since everyone else in the nation seemed to have an opinion, it might be refreshing to know what God thought. *"God told me He is rejoicing,"* his friend said.

*"Rejoicing?"* Jamie asked. *"How can God rejoice when one of His best-known TV evangelists has brought shame and reproach to the kingdom?"*

Then his friend quoted Jesus' closing statement in the parable of the good shepherd and the lost sheep. *"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent"* (Luke 15:7).

**His friend was not saying God rejoiced over Swaggart's SIN. But rather, He rejoiced over his REPENTANCE.**

Regardless of the rightness or wrongness of anything else, Jimmy Swaggart may have done before or after that circumstance, **HIS PUBLIC REPENTANCE PLEASED GOD.**

**REPENTANCE & FORGIVENESS are serious business. From time to time all of us need to "TURN-AROUND."**

And the healthiest person alive is the person who knows his or her sins are forgiven.

**So, if someone asks you about Jesus's last words here they are: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness should be preached in his name to all...you are witnesses to these things."**

**CAN HE COUNT ON YOU? Amen.**