

The Missing Note in Present-Day Preaching

By Henry Mahan

Bible Text: John 16:6

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Now, faith is the product of preaching. Scripture declares that “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” And whatever faith that men have, whatever belief to which they hold is a result of preaching which they have heard. “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.”

A knowledge of God, whatever attitude I have toward God almighty, whatever attitude I have towards his Word, toward his Church, whatever beliefs I have about his purpose, his dealings with me through Christ, depend upon the preaching that I have heard.

Our knowledge of God is the product of preaching. Our religion is the product of preaching. Our attitude toward ourselves, what we believe about sin, about the fall, about our sins of omission, commission of heart, of mind, of deed, of word, our attitude toward our fellow man is formed by the preaching that we have heard. Preaching is important. God hath chosen “by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” So faith, whatever faith I have or you have or whatever faith or belief that men have is a result of the preaching they’ve heard.

It’s amazing how important is this thing called preaching. Our religion, our knowledge of God depends upon the preaching that we have heard.

Now, something is missing. I’m not being mean, but I know something is missing and everybody knows something is missing. You know something is missing. We have large buildings today. We have churches everywhere. We have churches with tall steeples pointing to the sky. We have large auditoriums, but most of them stand empty except on special occasions or special days or special seasons.

We have millions of Bibles. Bibles are everywhere. The Bible has been translated into over 1000 different languages and everybody has got a Bible. Some people have several of them. But most of them are unread.

We have moral reformation, but most of it is just washing the dead bodies. There is no life inside. You know it and I know it and everybody knows it.

We have a superstitious regard for outward religion. People come into a church building, men take off their hats. Why? They have superstitious regard for outward religion, for an outward building. A person wouldn't think of having a funeral without a preacher. You wouldn't think of marrying without a preacher. People bring their babies to be dedicated. There are people all over this world who go to church four times in their life. They go when they are an infant to be sprinkled. They go when they are 12 years old to be confirmed or catechized. They go when they are married. And then they roll them in when they are dying. But they have a superstitious regard for outward religion.

But men do not walk with God. Men believe in heaven and they all want to go there. Men believe in Hell and nobody wants to go there. But as far as personal living union with a living God, very few people know what it means and very few people have experienced it.

Now what's caused that? It must be the preaching we've heard. We have orthodox doctrine, most fundamental religionists, most church members, most people who are not in the Church believe this book is God's Word. We have entitled it "Holy Bible."

Most people believe in the creation. There are a few people who argue evolution, but I say most people believe in the creation. Most people believe in the virgin birth. Most people believe in the cross. Most people believe in a resurrection. Most people believe in a Second Coming. Fundamentally, we are orthodox. Our beliefs have been handed down and we have accepted them without question. We have orthodox doctrine. We are Baptists or Methodists or Presbyterian or Nazarenes or Catholics or Jews or something. But everybody is something. Everybody has denominational preference depending upon their tradition.

But love for God, love for one another, it's not there. Joy in God, rejoicing in the Lord, rejoicing in life, in death, in prosperity, in adversity, rejoicing in time of affliction, in time of trial, in time of success. Somebody said, "God and soldier have a lot in common. We just love him when we need him." Peace of heart, peace with God, peace with ourselves, peace with one another. Something is missing. Patience, gentleness, goodness. These words are foreign. Faith to overcome, faith to walk through every day difficulties. Humility is a forgotten virtue. Today we're surrounded with pride of face, pride of race, pride of place and, unfortunately, pride of grace.

Something is missing. The religion is there. The orthodoxy is there. The system of belief is there, but something is missing. The life is missing. And the missing note is found in John 16:8. Our Lord gives it to us in his own words. He said, "When he, the Spirit of truth, when the Holy Ghost is come, he will convince the world of sin." And this is the missing note. The world—the religious world I'm talking about, the Church world, the professing world—has never been convinced of sin. The foundation work is missing. We have built buildings without foundations. Preachers have gone forth to convince men that God loves them.

"Smile. God loves you."

If you hear 10 sermons on TV today or 10 sermons on the radio you will hear just about 10 sermons on the love of God. And they have neglected to preach the wrath of God, the wrath of God that sent his Son to the tree, the wrath that nailed Christ to the cross. There's not a word about God's anger against sin.

Preachers have gone forth to convince men of God's willingness to save. And he is willing to save. He is plenteous in mercy. But that's not all the message. Men have not been convinced of God's determination to punish sin.

Somebody said to a man one time, "You believe a man who had no use for the gospel or the Church or cross," he said, "Do you think that you'll go to heaven when you die?"

He said, "Why sure. God will send me to heaven. That's what God's for."

Preachers have gone forth to convince men of God's willingness to receive them. But very little has been said about our unwillingness to come to God.

Christ said, "You will not come to me that you might have life."

Christ said, "Oh, Jerusalem. How oft would I have gathered you to myself, but you would not."

Preachers have gone forth to comfort people. Where is the prophet who disturbs? Preachers have gone forth to encourage people. Where is the man whom God said would reprove and rebuke and exhort with all longsuffering?"

We have plenty who are crying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. But where are the disturbers of Israel?

Men are built up who have never been brought down. Men are filled who have never been emptied. Men are giving hope who have never been without hope. Men are saved who have never been lost. Men are healed who have never been wounded. Men are exalted who have never been humbled. Men are given life who have never been slain in the Lord.

We sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch?" Where are the wretches? "I once was what? Lost, but now I'm found? Was what? Blind but now I see?" We're talking about the found and the seeing, but we're not talking about the lost and the blind. Men are given grace who have never been guilty.

The Holy Spirit never—and underscore that word "never"—never takes a man to Calvary until he takes him, first, to Sinai. That was Saul of Tarsus' whole trouble. He had religion without the foundation work, without Holy Spirit conviction. He had been lifted up and he had never been humbled. He had been hope, but he had never been without hope. He had been healed, but he had never been wounded.

So he said, “When the law came, I died.” God slew him. God stripped him. God broke him. God emptied him. And then God filled him.

The Holy Spirit never speaks peace to a person’s heart until that person has grieved and mourned over his guilt before God; guilt so great, so enormous that it can only be removed by the blood of the precious Son of God, guilt so great that it emptied heaven of its choice jewel, guilt so great that it brought down from heaven’s glory the Son of God on a special mission, guilt so great that only Christ himself in the flesh could put it away, guilt so great that our Lord must endure hell itself, guilt so great and shame so terrible that our Lord had to suffer and to bleed and to die for it.

Have you ever been there? That’s the missing note. We’re clothing sinners, covering their self righteous rags without stripping off the rags first. We’re trying to build foundations under people who already have foundations without having those foundations of flesh, of fleshly hope, of ceremonialism, of religion, of superstition swept away to where they cry, “Lord, save me or I perish.”

Here is the missing note in our Lord’s own words. You turn with me to Luke 18. Now, here’s the missing note in our Lord’s own words. What am I saying? I’m saying this: that preachers are crying “Peace, when there is no peace.” They are building up people who have never been broken. They are saving people who have never been lost. They are giving men a hope for heaven without a union with Christ. And our churches are filled with people who are walking in custom, duty, tradition, ceremonialism, doctrine and they are playing church. They are not approaching God with sincere hearts, earnest hearts or broken hearts or guilty hearts.

In Luke 18, verse 10, our Lord said: “Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee.” That Pharisee, you know without my describing him, a religious man, a moral man, an orthodox man, a teacher of the Scriptures. The other a publican, a common man, a sinful man, an ordinary man. “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, they are extortioners, they are unjust, they are adulterers. I’m not even as this publican.” And he pointed over there at this other gentleman. “Why I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

“And the publican,” our Master said, “standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful unto me a sinner. I tell you,” Christ declared, “this man went down to his house justified,” forgiven, just as if he had never sinned, holy, “rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself or his humbled or is broken, shall be exalted.”

Look at these two men. The Pharisee made his way up to the altar. He was familiar with these holy things. The Pharisee stood. That is, he came right into the holy place. He was familiar with the temple. He was familiar with the things of God. He felt that he belonged there. He was a moral man. He was a religious man. He was a studious man. He was a man who knew the doctrine. He was very comfortable in the temple and about

the holy things. The publican, our Lord said he stood afar off. He didn't feel worthy of the presence of God.

Someone said, "He stood afar off and left room between him and God for a mediator, for an intercessor, for an advocate. Like the people of Israel in Exodus 20, verse 18, when Moses gave them the holy law, when Moses gave them from Sinai's mountain that holy law of God, that law which reaches not only the act, but the thought, the attitude, not only the deed, but he imagination. When Moses gave them that holy law the Scripture says that the people stood afar off and they cried, "Moses, speak to God for us. Let not God speak to us lest we die."

The Pharisee was comfortable about the things of God, about the things of the temple, about the things of the house of God. He came in and walked right up to the holy place, up to the altar and he stood there and what else did he do? He evidently lifted his eyes toward heaven and spread his hands. That was their custom. They lifted up holy hands in prayer. And he felt his were holy enough to lift up.

In a matter of obedience, in a matter of self-satisfaction, like the song I was listening to before I came to church. You know, most religious singers don't pay any more attention to what they are singing, the words. It's a beautiful melody and they've got a beautiful voice and so they render it regardless of what it says. It may butcher the gospel.

And I was listening to my friend from Alabama sing on the record a while ago and he was singing about the end of the road. And this is the way one of the verses went. "With a gate open wide and a friend by my side that's all that I ask is a crown for my task when I get to the end of the road."

That's pride, pure old religious, arrogant pride. The publican would not...Christ didn't say he could not, he said he would not so much as lift his eyes, let alone his hands, toward heaven. He stood afar off. He felt unworthy in the presence of God. He felt his guilt. He felt his shame. And his downcast eyes revealed his shame. He wouldn't so much as lift his eyes to God let alone his hands. Oh, the grief in his heart over guilt.

The Pharisee, literally, denied his sins. He didn't feel them. He wasn't aware of them. He wasn't conscious of them. There's no confession of sin. Therefore there is no prayer. There can be no prayer without a confession of sin. There's not one confession, nothing but a self-righteous listing of all his good deeds and his good character.

"God, I thank you I'm not like other men. Other men are extortioners. Other men are unjust. Other men are adulterers. But not I. I've always lived a clean, moral, righteous life and I thank you, God."

The Scripture says here the publican would not so much as lift his eyes to heaven. His downcast eyes reveal the broken heart and he smote upon his breast.

Do you know what I think? I think he knew where the trouble was. The Pharisee didn't. The Pharisee talked about outward acts and outward deeds. "I've never done this and I've never done that and I've never done the other. Other people do these things. I've never done these things."

The publican smote on the fountain of sin. He knew the source of sin. He knew the fountain of sin. He smote on his breast. He cried "Oh, my heart, my heart, my wicked heart."

"God looketh on the heart. Man looketh on the outward countenance."

Aren't you glad folks can't see what you think? God can. Aren't you glad folks can't see your heart? God can. Aren't you glad folks don't know what you dream and what you imagine and what you think? God does.

"Keep thy heart. Out of it are the issues of life."

And as that publican stood there with his head down, not lifting his hands to heaven but smote upon breast, "Oh, the fountain of sin, the source of sin."

Turn to Matthew 15. Let's look at something the Lord says here. Matthew 15. These religious Pharisees were so exact about keeping the sabbath day, they were so exact about washing their hands before they ate. They were so exact about not eating certain meats. They were so exact about not drinking certain drinks. They were so exact about all of these things.

And our Lord said in Matthew 15:17: "Don't you understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth, goeth into the belly and is cast out into the draught, is cast out of the body? But those things which proceed out of the mouth, those words, they come from your heart. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. As a man thinketh in his heart so is he. And they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man."

This is sin. This religious world has never been convinced of sin. You can start in the primary department, go through the juniors, intermediates, young people and adults and you can ask people the question: "Who is going to heaven?"

They'll say, "Good people."

"Who is going to Hell?"

"Bad people."

And Satan has never conned this generation with a bigger lie than that lie.

Our Lord died to save sinners. And there are no good people. There is none good, no not one. You are superior to others only because they can't see your heart and, unfortunately, you can't see it; blind to sin. You've never been lost. Therefore you have never been found. You have never been stripped; therefore you have never been clothed. You've never been empty handed; therefore you have never been filled. You've never been humbled; therefore you have never been exalted. Oh, you have exalted yourself.

Look at that word again. Our Lord said in verse 14: "Everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased." And that's what we have done. The position before God that we have, we ourselves accomplished it. God didn't do it.

The Pharisee dealt with trivial things. Look at verse 12. "I fast twice in the week. I get up every morning and pray. I get up every morning and read my Bible. Thank you, Lord, I'm not an adulterer. Thank you, Lord, I'm not unjust. Thank you, Lord, I'm not an extortioner. Thank you, Lord, that I've never done these things. Other people do, but I never have. And, Lord, I thank you that I fast and read my Bible and pray and I give tithes of all that I possess. I've always taken my income and sliced off your tenth and given it to you faithfully, Lord. I sure am glad I've done all these things."

The Pharisee dealt with trivial things. Do you know what Paul called them? Dunghill garbage. He listed all his religious accomplishments: "A Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, born, circumcised to the tribe of Benjamin, concerning the law blameless. All these things I count them but dung that I may win Christ."

Isaiah called it "filthy rags." Aren't you ashamed to come into the holy presence of the living God and dangle under his nose your filthy rags? The publican had nothing to do with these second rate religious things. He prayed about weightier matters. The Pharisee prayed with himself. He didn't do any praying at all. He just bragged on himself. He listed his characteristics which he was quite pleased with. And he listed his religious deeds which are filthy rags.

The publican talked about weightier matters. He talked about sin. He talked about mercy. He talked about substitution. He talked about sacrifice. He talked about the blood.

"Where do you get that, preacher?"

Well, let's look at what he said. "God." He went straight to God. He didn't talk to the good Pharisee. He didn't look up the good religious Pharisee to talk to him. He didn't inquire of his fellow worshippers. He didn't even return the contempt of this Pharisee. The Pharisee was very contemptuous towards him.

"Why I'm not even like that publican."

And this blessed man didn't turn to the Pharisee and say, "I'm as good as you are."

I'm just as good as the folks in your church. I'm no worse off than your church members. I expect you're right. You're all sons of Adam. You're all born in sin. You're all under the wrath of God. What difference does it make whether you're in the Church under the wrath of God or down at the booze hall under the wrath of God. They are all under the wrath of God.

The Scripture says, "Therefore the law concludes all under sin. The law speaks that the whole world might be guilty, that every mouth may be stopped."

But this publican, he didn't go to people. He didn't return their contempt. He didn't argue with the congregation. He went to God. He said, "God." That's where mercy is. That's where salvation is. That's where grace is. He went to God. And what did he go to God for? He wanted mercy.

I don't know what he knew about the atonement. Oh, he had seen morning sacrifice and the evening sacrifice. He had seen the priest take the blood of atonement under the veil into the holy of holies. But according to every Bible commentator and every Greek lexicon, this man said this. He said, "God be propitiated, accept a sacrifice and pardon me." That's what he said. God be merciful.

The only way God can be merciful is by a sacrifice. The only way God can show mercy is for sin to be paid for. That's the only way God can be just and justify the ungodly. That's the only way God can be righteous and justify you is for a suitable sacrifice, for an effectual sacrifice, for a redeeming ransom to be offered. God must be just. God must be holy when he justifies the ungodly and when he forgives the guilty.

And this man comes for mercy. "Lord, be merciful. Let thy blood be propitiation for me."

That's the reason Christ died. He didn't die as an example or as a martyr or as a frustrated reformer. He died as a substitute. Our sins were laid on him. Our guilt was laid on him. Therefore, because he took our sins and paid our debt and suffered under the justice of God, then God can be just and set me free because my debt is paid, because my sins are put away.

And this man acknowledged his sin. "God, be merciful to me." And that "a" there is "the." It's a definite article. It's, "God, be merciful to me the sinner."

Mike was singing about it. "Suffer a sinner whose heart overflows, loving his Savior to tell what he knows. Once more to tell it would I embrace, I'm only a sinner, saved by grace."

I don't care if you are here this morning for the first time or if you've been here for 25 years. You are only a sinner. It doesn't matter if you have been a believer for five minutes or if you have been a believer for five years. You are still just a sinner saved by grace. You never graduate beyond God's grace. You never cease to be a sinner.

He didn't say, "I'm a reformed sinner. I'm a former sinner. I'm a penitent sinner. I'm a praying sinner. I'm an awakened sinner."

I'm tired of people putting those justifying names ahead of the word. You're just and I'm just the sinner. That's all.

Men see sin in proportion as they see God's holiness. Did you know that? That's the reason most people have a sorry conception of sin. It is because they have a sorry conception of God. Now you read the Bible and you'll find that out.

When Isaiah saw the Lord how did he see him? He saw him, he said in Isaiah six, "High and lifted up. His train filled the temple and the cherubims and seraphims cried, 'Holy, holy, holy.'"

And then Isaiah cried, "Woe is me. I'm a man of unclean lips. I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips."

You are pretty good because you are comparing yourself with the pretty bad. You will find out when you compare yourself with the perfect, immaculate, pure, holy God almighty in whose presence the heavens are not even clean and the stars are not pure, much less man that drinketh iniquity like the water, you'll find out how unholy you are. And the reason you have such a sorry conception of sin, the reason you have got sins catalogued so that you don't do this and you don't do that and you don't the other and you are a pretty good fellow is because you've got a pretty little god, a peanut god, mind you, an unholy god, a god like unto yourself who can only do what you will let him do, who can only be what you will let him be, who can only accomplish what you will let him accomplish.

"God, be merciful to me, the sinner."

Job thought he was a pretty good fellow. Job defended his righteousness, defended his morality, bragged about his accomplishments. He said, "I'll never let go of my righteousness."

Well, you know what happened in chapters 37, 38, 39 and 40, don't you? God revealed himself to Job in his holiness and Job said, "Lord, I've heard of you by the ear. But now mine eye seeth thee." And what was the result? "Wherefore I hate myself. I repent in sackcloth and ashes."

The missing note in present day preaching, the God of the Bible has not been preached; God in his holiness, God in his sovereignty, God in his immaculate justice, God in his righteousness, God in his love, holy love, pure love, immaculate love, sinless love. "In him is no darkness." And men in their sins. And until men see God in his holiness they will never be convicted of their guilt and of their sins.

They will still come with their idol, evil familiarity right into the presence of a holy God and begin to talk about who they are and what they have done. But somewhere, somehow the Holy Spirit is going to convince some people of sin when he has come. The preacher can't do it and your friends can't do it, but the Holy Ghost can. And he is going to come and he is going to whittle down some old sinner. Oh, and when he does it, it's tough. But thank God for Holy Spirit conviction.

He is going to come and he is going to lay bare your heart and how painful it will be. He will show you what you are. He will show you who you are. He will show you your hatred and your lust and your malice and your envy and your jealousy and your selfishness and your pride. He will strip you. He will knock all your foundations of religious flesh out from under you, all your ceremonialism and custom and tradition and heritage and background. And he will leave you empty, dangling over the gaping jaws of a burning condemning hell. The only thing between you and perishing is God's mercy. Guilty.

And you are going to cry, "Lord, save me or I perish." And I'll tell you this: If he ever does that for you and saves you, you'll love him, you'll worship him, you'll praise him, you'll be generous. He'll put peace in your heart. He will build you. He will put your feet on the right foundation. He will put joy in your heart. He will give you purpose for living. He will give you hope for dying. He will give you and advocate at the judgment.

It was for sinners that he suffered, iniquity, ruin and hell. Can you doubt you are a sinner? If you can then bid all hope farewell. But believing what is written, "I'm guilty, dead in sin." Look to the crucified Savior and hope shall rise thy soul within.

Our Lord was eating in the home of a Pharisee, one of these religious fellows one day. And there was a woman who came in off the street. Of course, she wasn't invited. She came in off the streets and she fell at his feet in repentance and godly sorrow and bathed his feet with tears and dried them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet. And that proud religious Pharisee who had tithed his income that sabbath day and fasted twice that week and spent his time in the morning and evening prayers and been down to the church and won some souls and given his money and given alms to the poor he looked down and he thought, "If that fellow was a prophet he would know that woman is a sinner and he wouldn't let her touch him let alone kiss his feet."

And our Lord looked up. He knew men's thoughts. And he said, "Simon," this was Simon the Pharisee. "Simon, I have something to ask you."

Simon said, "Say on, Master."

He said, "Simon, there was a fellow that owed a man \$500,000." That's an enormous debt. "And, Simon, that man forgave him, just told him to write it off, write it off, paid. Now, Simon, there was another man that owed that same fellow \$10 and that fellow told him, too, to write it off, mark it paid. Simon, which one of those fellows will love him the most?"

Simon said, “Well, Lord, the one to whom he forgave the most will love him most.”

Our Lord said, “Simon, thou hast well said. Thou hast well said. I came to your house, Simon, and you gave me no kiss of greeting at the door. This woman hath not ceased to kiss my feet.”

You want to know why church members have to be coerced to come to church and begged to give, begged to come to prayer meeting and begged to read their Bible? You have to give them awards and all these things. Same reason Simon didn't meet the Lord and kiss him.

“Simon, I came to your door and you didn't give me any water to wash my feet. They were tired and dirty and weary and you didn't give me any water. This water bathed my feet with tears. Simon, I came to your door and you gave me no precious ointment to anoint my hot and dry head. This woman has anointed my feet with everything she has. I say unto thee, Simon, her sins which are many are all forgiven. To whom much is forgiven you love much.”

You want to know what's wrong? I know what's wrong. These preachers, I don't know whether they know it or not, but the missing note in present day preaching is the conviction of sin. Men have never been lost. We've got them to make decisions when they are juniors or sophomores or something else or primaries and we have run them through the baptismal waters and put their names on the roll. We'll call in a hot shot singer and our hot shot preacher and he'll tell his little jokes and preach his little sermons that he has preached all over the country and give his invitation and down the aisle they run, shake the preacher's hand, run them through the pool, put their name on the roll, kiss them good bye. They are already to die. They have been dead and they are still dead and they have never received life. They have never been lost, never been convicted.

Our Father in heaven, oh God, be merciful to me. Let thy blood be propitiation for me. Forgive my sins through the blood of thy sin. Be merciful to me, the sinner. Reveal unto us the true condition of our fallen hearts. Reveal unto us the true condition of our minds and our wills. Shut us up to mercy until we call on the living God, until he speaks to us in pardon and peace.

Lord, move in our midst. Leave us not to ourselves. Help us that we might be saved from this perverse religious generation for we pray it in Christ's name. Amen.