

Partners in the Gospel

Reverend Dr. Bob Lewis

Good Morning!

You know I get invited a lot of places one time, and it's wonderful to be back. I was here fourteen years ago, and Jim Stallings reminded me of that yesterday. I want to thank you very much for the invitation to come and speak this morning.

It's wonderful to be with Jim and Jane, it was a sad day when we had to say "good-bye" to them; they had been there for like a year and a half, and I can't begin to tell you how very thankful I am to see where they are today and how intertwined they are with the work and mission of this church. That's what gives any pastor great joy . . . and so thank you so very much for inviting me to kick off this stewardship season.

Most of you know Lou Holtz; Lou Holtz, former head coach of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish and then the South Carolina Gamecocks, and now he's a sports commentator and a great motivational speaker. One of his favorite stories is about a man who accidentally ran his car into a ditch out in the country. The man was not hurt at all but he was stuck, he simply couldn't get out. So he asked this farmer for help and the farmer said "I have an old mule named Dusty and I think Dusty can pull you out. The farmer hooked Dusty up to the car and when he was ready, the farmer snapped the reins and he shouted, "Pull Jack, pull Joe, pull Tom, pull Dusty", and amazingly that old mule pulled the car out of the ditch with relative ease, and the car owner was impressed, and he was so grateful and appreciative. And he thanked the farmer profusely, and then he said to the farmer, "Let me ask you something . . . Why did you call Dusty by four different names?" And this farmer said, "Well you see it's like this, old Dusty's eyesight is just about gone, and if he thought for a minute that he was the only one pulling, he wouldn't have tried at all."

Now the faith that holds the First Presbyterian Church of Belmont together and keeps it going is rooted in the good news that you're not alone. This is not a solo act; unlike Dusty, you really have somebody helping you. Christ is with you, you can count on that; He's your strength,

He's your comfort, He's your salvation, and you can face anything because He is with you and will see you through and He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. We just read that in our text. So the theme of this stewardship season is really a great one . . . Partners in Christ. Partners in Christ is a great theme because a strong, healthy and vibrant church has a strong spirit of connectedness with God and with one another. Now I go to a lot of churches and I don't feel like this in a lot of the churches. I feel that here. There is a spirit of connectedness with God and with one another. And that's what it's all about, connecting with God and with God's people. Life is partnership with God. I don't know of anything that will make you more loving than seeing yourselves as God's partners. I can't think of anything that will make you more generous than seeing yourselves as God's partners. And I can't think of anything that will make you more giving than seeing yourselves as God's partners. Our connection with God is absolutely transforming, is transformational.

Some years ago, the great boxer, Mohammed Ali, was asked by this guy who had come out of one of the inner cities and was now in college, how he could go about quitting school and starting a boxing career since he had bad grades. And Ali smiled at this guy and said in his poetic fashion, "Stay in college and get the knowledge, and stay there 'till you're through. If God can make penicillin out of moldy bread, God can make something out of you." I'm here this morning to say God so loved the world, he sent Jesus to make something out of you. He sent Jesus to make something out of me. When you open yourself to Him and commit your heart to Him, He gives you new life in this world and new life in the world to come. And you stop trying to get your way, and instead you put God's way at the forefront. That becomes a major priority in your life, and you become more loving and more Christ-like. I've always loved the old camp song, Spirit of the Living God, it puts it beautifully. "Spirit of the living God, melt me, mold me, fill me, use me."

I remember at the end of a wedding rehearsal dinner, this handsome young groom stood up to thank everybody, and his very first sentence moved everyone in the room to tears, and here's what he said, he said, "If I lived thirty lifetimes, I could never repay my family for all that they've done for me." And I thought, what a wonderful, wonderful statement. Well, that's exactly how I feel about the church. If I live thirty lifetimes, I could never repay the church for all it has done for me. The church has supported me, and encouraged me; the church has prayed for me, the church has given me inspiration and direction, vision and purpose. The church has given me compassion

and love and comfort. It has been with me on the mountain peaks of life, and it has also been with me in the deepest valleys of life. And I'm so grateful for the church; the church has given me my ethics and my priorities and my attitudes. The church has given me my theology and my Bible. And the church has given me one more thing that only the church can give; the church has given to me my Lord. There are many wonderful organizations and institutions in the world, vying for your attention and your energy and your resources, but the church is uniquely special because it exists for one purpose: to give you the love of Jesus Christ, His transforming power.

Let me tell you something: I believe in the church because there is no institution in the world that serves people like the church, there's no institution in the world that helps families like the church, there's no institution in the world that redeems lives like the church, there's no institution in the world that teaches love like the church, and there's no institution that lifts God up like the church, and there's good reason for that – it's because there's no institution in the world that is known as the Body of Christ.

My friends, we are not our own, we belong to God. And that's the bottom line. You're here as people of faith today to share Him with a needy world and everything you do is for that purpose. You have Worship services and Sunday School classes. You have prayer groups and support groups and Bible study groups, and youth groups and children's groups. What a tremendous blessing it was to see that many children, good looking children, coming down for the Children's Sermon today. You, you have a Day School, you do mission work groups, you build houses and serve the people of this community and the larger community. You do ministries in the name of Jesus Christ in far away places; you feed the hungry and you help the needy. And all for one purpose: so you can share the love and the presence of Jesus Christ, so you can tell people about the One who's given you life abundant and everlasting.

Ken Medema expresses the need of so many lost and hurting people today in his song, If This Is Not A Place. He asks for a place where one can go who's seeking answers, seeking love and acceptance, and when needing to speak and really be heard. There's not many people in the world that accepts people like that. So many people need a place of friendship, of love and security, but there aren't many opportunities for them. So where do we go for acceptance, where do we go for love and a new lease on life? And Medema sings, "If this is not a place where tears are understood,

where can I go to cry? And if this is not a place where my spirit takes wing, where can I go to fly?” This is the place, this is the place . . . the place of faith, and hope and love, the place of Christian nurture and growth. This is the place, you’re Partners in the Gospel, Partners in the Gospel. You partner with one another, to do what only the church can do, to carry on what Christ came to do, to connect people to God and connect people with one another.

Let me ask you something . . . Are you as closely connected to God and to other people as you could be, and should be? When people say that to me I say “Come to church. Come to church, get more involved in the life of the church.” I learned a lot of this from AA people, ninety meetings in ninety days. Come to the meetings and it will happen. Come to church, get more involved in the life of the church because this is the place, this is the community of faith that can help you feel connected to God and to life and to other people. And that’s why you need to be here on Sundays, that’s why you need to make church attendance a priority in your life. It’s the best way I know of to stay connected to God and to one another. So let me ask you again, how are you doing? How connected to Christ are you; how connected to the church are you right now? How faithful are you really in supporting the church with your presence?

Let me put that in perspective by asking you to think about it like this: If a car would start one out of three times, would you consider it faithful? If your television only worked sixty percent of the time, would you consider it faithful? If your newspaper delivery person should skip your house every other day and an occasional Friday, would you call that faithful? If your water heater should greet you with cold water three days a week, I mean would it be faithful? If you should fail to go to work ten or twelve days each month, even if you had a job after that, would your employer consider you faithful? If you should miss a couple of house payment in a year, would your mortgage holder say, “Well, ten out of twelve? That’s not too bad.” What am I saying? If you attend church once or twice a month, twenty-five to fifty percent of the time, would you say that’s faithful? Now that’s something to think about, isn’t it? We are called to be faithful in being here and then when we get here, we work together.

I saw your time and talent sheet, its impressive. A few years ago, I went to a High School football game in Cleveland Tennessee. It was a night they were dedicating a great new track to my brother who died suddenly in his sleep at age ninety as he was preparing for a marathon in Hawaii

that Christmas. While sitting there in the stands, I had a very strange thought, preachers, Sam, we get thoughts many different places. And I got this thought at this football game: I imagined that you go to a football game and fifty players huddle up with their three coaches, and suddenly the referee blows his whistle to start the game, and a crazy thing happens . . . the fifty players stand there on the sidelines, and the three coaches run out onto the field to play the game. And some of the players shout encouragement, they say, “Go get ‘em coach, put it on coach, you can do it, coach.” But none of the players, not a single one goes out onto the playing field, they expect the coaches to do it all. Now if you saw that at a football game, if that happened now today at Charlotte at the Panther’s game, what would you think? You would think, “This is the most bizarre thing I’ve ever seen.” And yet that’s the way some people relate to the church, they think the ministers and the staff are supposed to do it all, the elders and the deacons, but the other church members, they just stand by and watch. It doesn’t work that way because we’re partners in the work of Christ.

That’s certainly not the Biblical example, letting a few people do it all. I want you to think about it, when Jesus called those early disciples, to join Him in ministry, and please don’t miss this, they were not professional clergy-persons, they were not trained priests, they hadn’t just come out of Columbia, Union or Princeton. They were simply regular folk with willing hands and willing hearts who just made themselves available, so that the light of Jesus Christ could be seen in their lives. You got it? That’s what we’re called to do, that’s what we’re called to be, ready, willing and available to do our best, and to trust God for the rest. He has a special job that only you can do, and I wonder, can you hear His call? Can you hear His call? What does God have for you? It’s a partnership, it’s not for just a few, but it’s for you too, all of you.

Your mission statement says that you, in gratitude to God, will strive to serve Jesus Christ in your daily tasks and minister to all God’s people. And I love that statement, so let me ask you something . . . have you found your ministry yet? Have you found your job here in this church? You have all kinds of jobs here, some of them are technical, some of them call for special talent, like the choir; I’ve never been asked to sing in the choir. But most of them, most of the jobs in the church require only willing hearts and willing hands and you know that’s the truth.

I read a story about a man who knelt at the altar and prayed for a friend. He said, “O Lord, help my friend. Help him Lord, before it’s too late. Touch him, touch him, even if just with your

finger.” And then it was almost as if he heard the voice of God whispering back in his ear, “You touch him, you be my finger.”

Do you remember the time you stood in front of the church? I remember it so clearly. There in front of the cross, and you made a sacred promise to God. I wonder if you remember that. You promised to be loyal to the church and to support it with your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service. You stood there and you made that promise to God, and I want to say to you this morning as you journey through these next two or three weeks, I hope you will remember in the words of Robert Frost, “You have promises to keep, and miles to go before you sleep, miles to go before you sleep.”

In about three weeks, you’re going to have Commitment Sunday, and you’re going to make pledges. I read and I heard again this morning a possible 350 pledging units in this church, you’ve got about 136, that’s not good enough, that’s not good enough. And I wonder can we count on you, can we count you in, as William Howe asked it so well. We need more pledges and we need bigger pledges. You have been blessed.

I used to preach a lot on stewardship at First Presbyterian, and Jim and Jane will tell you that, I didn’t put them up to it, and I said, you know, you need to give with three things in mind: You need to give with a lot of joy and excitement. I’ve always heard you give until it hurts, I don’t believe that; you give until it feels good. Give until it feels good, you feel good about this gift. And then secondly, you give regularly. I used to have a member who gave once a year, he was the biggest giver of the whole congregation. He never attended, he just attended once a year. People wondered when Dick was going to come to church because they needed his gift so badly. Give regularly; the offering is taken Sunday in and Sunday out. And thirdly, be a percentage giver. Give as God has blessed you. Early on, when I was just a little kid, my mother taught me the meaning of tithing. For every dollar, we had a little jar, ten cents went into the jar, and then another ten cents. Later as I got a little bigger, if I got ten dollars, one dollar went into the jar. That went to the church. Be a percentage giver as God has blessed you, and I wonder, can we count you in? Can we count you in? I hope so.

So let me ask you, how strong is your commitment to God and the church, right now, on a scale of one to ten, with ten being super terrific and one being very poor, how would you rate your commitment to the church? A ten? Really? Is your commitment super terrific? Or is it a seven, or a six, or a five or maybe a four? Let me ask it another way . . . If every member of your church had your level of commitment, what kind of church would you be? If every member of the church supported the church, served the church, loved the church and gave to the church just like you do, what kind of church would you be? Are you giving your best, could you do more? Could you help more? Could you contribute more? Could you be stronger in your commitment to the church?

When the young Michelangelo announced that he wanted to become a sculptor, a master sculptor said to him, “My son, this will take your life.” And young Michelangelo answered, “What else is life for?”

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