

# A Talk With Tomlinson Run

(By Paul R. Blake)

Introduction: (Charts of the Zimbabwe congregation)

A. Why this lesson is being preached:

1. The elders are not undertaking this lesson to put you down; the Lord knows we have been through considerable hardship of late.
2. We are not doing this to get you in line like some parody of a headmaster of an 18<sup>th</sup> century school.
3. We are doing this because we share the same nature as you. We are imperfect men who made our own mistakes and learned from them. And while our mistakes and temptations may differ from yours, the consequences and means of overcoming them are the same.
  - a. We are watching all of you and noting that some are entering into a pattern that will only end in sorrow and pain.
  - b. We have been blessed to be forgiven and and responsible to share what we have learned with you.
  - c. We've been there and don't want you to experience the same thing. We are not perfect men, but we are scripturally qualified to lead this congregation and to admonish you in the manner you will receive today
  - d. *Heb. 13:7, 17 - "Remember those who rule over you, who have*

*spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct... 17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."*

B. Please ask yourself these questions and answer them honestly:

1. Why do I come to worship?
2. What do I bring to God as I worship?
3. What should I bring in fellowship to others while I worship?
4. What I get out of it is subsidiary to worship, not the primary purpose. Understanding this will answer the issues of attendance, reverence, attire, and sincere love of the brethren.

C. More questions

1. Are you aware that God knows why you are here while you are here?
2. Will telling you why you need to be here or what you should be thinking or feeling make a difference in the direction of your service to God?
3. Then what will make a difference? What will it take to make you care enough to overcome this dangerous trend?
4. Until this becomes the deepest longing of your life, you will always struggle with your faith, and risk being lost in the end.

D. Still more questions

1. What do I want out of life? A good life here or a better life there?
2. What am I doing to bring it about? What you do reveals what is most important to you.
3. How can I bring my manner of life in keeping with my stated goals?

## **I. FAITHFUL SERVICE TO GOD**

- A. Faithful service to God is not about marking time or meeting a quota or a minimum standard. That way lies progression into apostasy.
- B. Four possible results when one starts down that path:
  - 1. He turns around immediately and pursues excellence before he reaches the point of compromise infectivity (where one's thinking has changed from right and wrong to shades of varying acceptability)
  - 2. He lives in acceptance of marginal Christianity (There is no continuing on indefinitely in this manner)
  - 3. He gradually drifts to lesser degrees of service
  - 4. He becomes apostate
- C. Symptoms of this syndrome
  - 1. Content with infrequent attendance
  - 2. Skipping Bible class
  - 3. Habitually missing Sunday evening worship
  - 4. Increase in casual attire in worship
  - 5. Not everyone has fallen into this pattern; in fact, several are growing in these areas, and it is well appreciated
  - 6. Some may be asking themselves at this point: "What is the minimum I need to attend to keep you elders from disciplining me?"
    - a. "What are you elders going to do if I don't change?"
  - 7. If you are asking these questions, it may already be too late for the elders to help prevent you from falling away.

## **II. ALARMING TRENDS**

- A. On an increasing basis, local churches for practical, financial and other less noble reasons are cutting back on the work of edification:
  - 1. 2/3s of churches in the tri-state area no longer have gospel meetings
  - 2. Nearly 1/3 of them have eliminated Sunday evening worship
  - 3. 3/4s of them have no structured, carefully overseen Bible class system
  - 4. Only one in five have elders; business meeting leadership
- B. This weakens churches and individual Christians.
  - 1. Gospel meetings revive the faith and resolve of the disciples. Without them, all of these and other benefits go lacking
  - 2. Abandoning Sunday evening worship cuts out one third of the edification the disciples receive. Many who have done this do not increase the time spent in worship and study in the morning.
  - 3. Good Bible classes rank near the top in a list of factors that predict the future spirituality of the children who attend.
  - 4. No scriptural leadership means that unqualified men who lack maturity and spiritual mindedness become responsible for the future of a church
- C. Collectively and individually
  - 1. It is critical that you attend Gospel meetings faithfully
  - 2. That you attend as much as is within your power all of the regular services of this church

3. That you attend, participate in, and develop as teachers of our Bible classes, and that you get your children here to do the same
  4. And that you show respect for the leaders of this congregation.
    - a. Your personal judgment about the decisions of the elders is your own and you need to keep it to yourself, both in not expressing it verbally or with personal boycotts.
    - b. Unless there is a clear matter of revealed doctrine involved, not personal opinions about its application, the Lord requires that you cooperate
- D. We must hold fast in these matters to protect you and your children from loss
1. We are aware that neighboring congregations on an increasing basis are reducing the number of services they hold. You must not look to them for an example of how we should conduct ourselves here at TR.
    - a. Churches that cut the number of services and continue to thrive are the exception, not the rule.
  2. Likewise with individual members who reduce the frequency of their own attendance and that of their families.
    - a. Those who continue to thrive are the rare exception, not the rule.
    - b. Never look to weak and drifting persons as the standard by which you measure your own faithfulness - "I'm doing as well or better than..."
  3. Future adult Bible class teachers, deacons and elders
    - a. Not addressing those who are doing fill in preaching, learning to teach the class, or presently working toward becoming leaders.
    - b. 40 years ago, there were eight men who could teach the adult Bible class. Today there are four; one of them is in his mid-60s, one is an evangelist typically not a permanent resident, and the other two have obligations a couple of times each month in preaching elsewhere. Where will we be in ten years?
    - c. Adult Bible class teachers begin preparation to become so in their late teens, by beginning a lifetime practice of increasingly deeper study. How many of the rest of you are dedicating yourselves to deeper study, or excusing yourself by claiming a lack of ability?

### **III. WORSHIP ISN'T ABOUT YOU**

- A. Worship isn't about you in the matter of attendance.
1. Often, we mistakenly think that we attend to get something out of worship. It is about reinforcing and building our relationship with God.
  2. A faithful Christian isn't one who attends all of the services. You can program a robot to do that; it doesn't make it faithful.
  3. A faithful Christian is one who is faithful from the heart
    - a. He desires to gather to worship God at every opportunity
    - b. He wishes for more occasions where he can be with God's people in His presence, just like he expects it will be in heaven.

- c. He works to keep secular things in their place so they won't interfere with his opportunities to worship.
- d. Worship is about God and our overruling desire to come together with Him and His people
- e. *Matt. 18:20 - "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."*
- f. *Psalm 122:1 - "I was glad when they said to me, Let us go into the house of the LORD."*

B. Worship isn't about you in the matter of reverence.

- 1. It is about God and it is about what you communicate to His children and those outside of the faith who come into our assembly.
- 2. Get over the self-indulgent and somewhat paranoid attitudes of "People don't need to be looking at me and judging me."
- 3. You are a Christian and a representative of Jesus Christ and a servant of God, look like it, act like it. People are going to be looking at you for an example. God planned it that way; Jesus said it's so. Get over it.
- 4. The Lord set us to be the world's Bible, because most people won't pick up a printed one.
- 5. You are to keep the commands of reverence and modesty with the same effort you keep the command to commune on Sunday
- 6. *Matt. 5:14-16 - "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."*
- 7. Americans value casualness; God looks for reverence and modesty.
- 8. *Lev. 26:2 - "You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I am the LORD." Psalm 89:7 - "God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, And to be held in reverence by all those around Him." Mal 1:6 - "A son honors his father, And a servant his master. If then I am the Father, Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, Where is My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts To you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?'" Titus 2:7 - "In all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility" Heb. 12:28 - "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear."*
- 9. Our worship captures the attention of heaven.
  - a. *"I am there in the midst of you"* Our fellowship in worship is not merely with one another, it is also with Christ worshiping God
  - b. *Matt. 26:29*

C. Worship isn't about you in the matter of addressing the needs of the weak.

- 1. There are several customary reactions we have toward the needs of the weak that have contributed to their ongoing condition of weakness and its long term effects:
  - a. "Preach on it" (code for "I'm too afraid to speak face to face")

- b. "Tell them like it is" (code for "I think ranting is as good as declaring the whole counsel of God")
  - c. Ostracize them (because it always helps the weak to have the strong treat them like lepers)
  - d. Smother them
  - e. Talk about them with others
  - f. Tell me about it or send me to address it
2. The elders have resolved to increase our attention to the spiritual needs of the members here.
- a. If you are falling or have fallen into a pattern of drifting, we will come to encourage and admonish you that you might not fall away entirely.
  - b. This is not punitive; it is recuperative. How will you receive it?
3. The one everyone else in the family blames for the family's problems, when treated accordingly, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- a. Truth is the whole family is often dysfunctional in dealing with it.
  - b. So it is in the local church. We often consider one person or family or group to be the sole source of the church's troubles.
  - c. Not so; we all have a share in the success or failure based on unhealthy ways we respond. Treat a weak brother like a problem, he will become a problem.
  - d. "It's his fault; he/the congregation/the family is the problem."
    - 1) If he left, your unhealthy response pattern would still be with you ready to rise up against the next weak brother
    - 2) If you leave for another church, you will take your attitude and dysfunctional responses with you
    - 3) We are a family. Do you drive away a family member who suffers with a weakness, or work harder to help him?
4. What about sitting down and meditating on what would get to your heart if you were in the same place,
- a. Then make the resolve to say that to them personally,
  - b. Before doing so, spend a long time in prayer about it,
  - c. And then grow some courage and increase your love by going to talk to them yourself?
  - d. *Gal 6:1 - "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."*
5. What will help you become a better helper of the weak that they might become strong?
- a. Will it help to remember that your sins are no more palatable to God than the erring brother's?
  - b. Will it help to remember that without God's grace and mercy, you would be in no better state than a Pharisee?
  - c. Will it help to remember that God loves him just as much as He loves you? Maybe it would help to clasp his hand or hug his shoulders when you tell him.

- d. *1Thes. 5:14 - "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all." Uphold the weak! (Demonstrate it)*
- e. That's how it will need to be done spiritually as well. I may not be able to walk as fast, but we will both get there this way.
- f. You want to uphold the weak, stop praising the successful only; God will take care of that; and instead, start praising the weak even if their victories are small.

#### **IV. HALLMARKS OF HEALTH IN A CONGREGATION**

*1Cor 12:12-18 - "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free--and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? 18 But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased."*

- A. Growth - All living things are characterized by growth. As long as you and I live in our bodies, we are maturing; we are changing; and we are growing.
  - 1. The church is no exception. When people think of growth in the church, they immediately think of numerical growth. The primary way a church demonstrates life is to continue to develop spiritually. When a church ceases to grow spiritually, it begins degenerating and dying.
- B. Harmony - When a physical body develops problems, it is because there is disharmony or dysfunction in the body. Cancer is a good example of this. Some of the cells become warped and attack other cells in the body. If untreated, the result will be deterioration and death of the body.
  - 1. The same is true in the church. When a church is alive and well, there will be unity and harmony in the fellowship. When a church becomes fractured, it is headed for disintegration and death.
- C. Emotion - Because I am alive, I can laugh; I can cry; I feel pain; I feel joy; I have emotions. When a physical body dies, it does not show emotion.
  - 1. A living church experiences and appreciates emotions. There will be times when we will laugh together, weep together, rejoice together, sing together, hurt together, and pray together. Churches that stoically go through the motions are dead.
- D. Movement - Physical bodies are in motion. One sure sign of death is the complete absence of motion.
  - 1. So it is within the church. When the church is alive, there will be movement. The church will be active doing the work of the Lord.
- E. Soundness - A sound body is a healthy body capable of all of the above.
  - 1. A sound church is a church that is not only faithful to the doctrine of Christ; it embraces and rejoices in it

## V. THE SOLUTION FOR CHURCHES AND INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

A. Rev. 2:1-5 - *"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place--unless you repent.'"*

1. Ephesus appeared to be strong when they were actually dying

B. Re-awaken - *"From where you have fallen"*

1. We must awaken to the fact that we have a problem as a congregation and especially as individuals.

2. We must be honest in acknowledging it to ourselves and to those for whom we are responsible or accountable.

C. Remember - *"Remember therefore"*

1. We need to remember from where the Lord brought us and what He has done for us. We need to honestly assess where we are relative to where we have been.

2. We need to remember the days when we served the Lord out of a glad heart and wanted more than anything to do His will. *"I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary."*

D. Restore - *"Do the first works"*

1. There are still some things that have life in them. These things are to be restored before they die out. The faith and works that made us strong in the beginning will restore and rebuild us in decline

E. Repent - *"Repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place--unless you repent."*

1. When the things of God are allowed to die, the only recourse individuals and churches have is to repent

## VI. HOW TO ENSURE A FALLING AWAY

A. "You should avoid making waves" - Rev. 3:14-19 - *"And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' --and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked-- I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that*

*you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.”*

1. Laodicea strove for mediocrity (just enough to get by)
    - a. They ended up falling short
  2. They saw no need to improve - *1Kings 18:21 - “And Elijah came to all the people, and said, How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him. But the people answered him not a word.”*
    - a. Serving the Lord is not about having it both ways
    - b. *Matt. 6:24 - “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon”*
  3. It is appealing to avoid change and growth; it gives the appearance of stability and peace. But it inevitably leads to stagnation
    - a. *Psalm 123:4 - “Our soul is exceedingly filled With the scorn of those who are at ease, With the contempt of the proud.”*
- B. We are to be fervent in spirit
1. *Rom. 12:11 - “Not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord”*
  2. *Matt. 12:30 - “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad.”*
  3. Christ found mediocrity disgusting.
    - a. Cold is better than doing just enough
    - b. *2Peter 2:21 - “For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them.”*

#### Conclusion:

- A. Will this church survive long into the future? It has been in existence for 67 years, but that doesn't guarantee it will continue for another 60
- B. A few can't prop up a dying church or carry drifting Christians for very long
  1. Sardis had some who were faithful, but they could not preserve that church by themselves
  2. Preachers, elders, or a few faithful members can't keep a church alive for long without the entire membership growing and being active.
- C. Don't believe the teenage fairy tale (“It's not going to happen to me.”)
  1. I keep the records here. They go back to 1962. The list of members who have left the Lord is more than twice the length of the list of members who remained faithful throughout their lives.
  2. Look around at the neighboring congregations who were once healthy and strong, but now consist of a few dozen members struggling to keep the doors open. Consider what they did or didn't do that brought it about
  3. For God's sake, for your children's sake, for this church's sake, and for your own sake, heed this lesson and reverse this trend.
- D. The elders here will be happy to talk with you about any question you may have about this lesson. Let's work together as a family to ensure the future.