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Pastor Jonathan Falwell

Next? The New Normal

Scripture: Various

Summary: Pastor Jonathan begins a new series, *Next? The New Normal*, which sets forth a vision for the future of Thomas Road Baptist Church.

Jerry Falwell clip: I was 22 years old and started a church from scratch in a bottling company building with thirty-five people. And then the Thomas Road facilities are now right here in the new Thomas Road facilities on Liberty Mountain. We shall replicate what God has done in the first fifty years because of the foundation that He has given us from which to launch the future ministry.

Jonathan Falwell clip: Dad would stand here in the old facility and he would say to us over and over again that in the next five years he was trusting God to do more than God had done in the previous fifty.

Jerry Falwell clip: We must, as a church, trust God as never before to help us give the Gospel of grace to our generation, to 6.6 billion souls in this our generation.

Jonathan Falwell clip: He wrote the vision clear as day, and today we read the vision, we dwell on the vision, we take the vision and internalize it. We believe in the vision today. Thomas Road Baptist Church runs with that vision.

Jerry Falwell clip: We must fill our Jerusalem, our Judea with the message of the Gospel of grace.

Jonathan Falwell clip: ...that if we as a church are going to accomplish all that God wants us to accomplish in the future, and individually we must be ready to be used by God.

Jerry Falwell clip: We can't live on memories. We cannot talk about what God has done. We must step forward now into the greater future.

Jonathan Falwell clip: We trust Him to take us to a new level, to a new level of ministry. We stand today ready to move, ready to serve, ready to launch into the future that God has for us.

Jonathan: In 1956, this church was founded with thirty-five adults and a number of kids that got together with a heart, with a passion, with a desire to reach this community with the Gospel of

Jesus Christ, and so they gathered together that day and they began talking about how to change their world. They began talking about what God wanted them to do, to go out into the roads, the highways, the hedges, the byways of this community and to allow people to see who Christ is. So they set out to do that. They went out there and they knocked on doors, they went out there and they reached people, they went out there and they shared the truth of God's love at every opportunity, at every place.

My dad coined a phrase many years ago, back when this church was very young, the phrase "saturation evangelism." Reaching every available person at every available time by using every available means. He shared that with us as a church. Many of you remember him talking about that, how we must go, how we must reach, how we must share the love of God with this community.

A few months ago I began asking myself a question, looking back over fifty-seven years of ministry in this community, asking myself a question: Are we gaining ground or are we losing ground?

The initial reaction to that question: we're gaining ground. God has blessed in amazing ways. Look what God has done. Look at the thousands of people who come and worship here each and every week. Look at the ministries that we are involved in around the world. Look at what we're doing in Guatemala; nearly 600 churches that we've planted in Kenya; hundreds of churches in India and Nepal and what we're doing in so many places around the world. Look what God is doing. We are gaining ground.

But then I began getting honest with myself. I said, "Wait a minute. We're a local church that God has planted in a local community. Are we gaining ground in the city of Lynchburg, in the counties surrounding Lynchburg, in Appomattox and Amherst and Bedford and Campbell? There are about 254,000 people who call these localities their home. Statistics tell us from the most recent information that of those 254,000 people, 111,334 are unchurched. They are not part of a local body of believers like this one.

Now certainly in that 111,334 there are some who have a relationship with Jesus Christ, they have come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior, but for whatever reason they have disengaged from the local church. I understand that could be true, but what is also true is that the vast majority of that 111,334 people that are not churched in our community do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

We look at what started in 1956 to where we are today. Are we gaining ground or are we losing ground? I had to come to a very difficult reality. To answer that question honestly I have to say we are probably losing ground.

When this church was started, there weren't even 111,334 people that lived in our community; now that many are lost. What are we going to do about it? What must we do now? What must we do next?

You heard Dad say in that video a few moments ago that we must launch ourselves forward into that greater future that God has in store for us, that greater future that God wants us to be involved in, of going out to reach this world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to reach this community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ—Matthew 28, Mark 16, Acts 1. So many times I've shared with you that God has called us to go. You will not find in those passages Jesus saying, "Go and build a big church." He didn't say that. You won't find Jesus saying, "Make sure you get together on Sunday morning and have a wonderful time of fellowship."

There is nothing wrong with that; it's important, the Bible encourages us to get together, "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together," but what did Jesus say that we must do? He said, "Go and preach the Gospel to every creature." He said, "Go into Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth and share with them the love of Jesus Christ."

The question that we have to ask ourselves: Are we doing everything we can to reach every available person at every available time, by using every available means? The question: Are we doing that?

When you look at the statistics, the things that are happening in our communities, the 254,000 people, 111,334 are unchurched. Let me share with you some other information that we need to know about.

In one year's time, 28 percent of all the babies born in our community are born into unmarried homes. In one year, 348 teenagers got pregnant while in school. We had over 457 abortions in one year. Sixteen hundred thirty-seven marriages; 947 divorces. Are we gaining ground or are we losing ground?

We continue looking at facts that are out there in the commonwealth of Virginia. In 2012 there were 35,478 completed reports of suspected child abuse and neglect, involving 52,675 children. Many of them are in the schools that you guys serve. In 2012 every ten days a child died from abuse and neglect. Every six days, a child age 19 and younger is murdered. Every four hours a family seeks shelter from a domestic violence program but is turned away because there is no room. Every five hours a child witnesses an act of domestic violence. In an average moment, there are 6,374 children in our state that are in foster care because of what is taking place at home. Every 88 minutes a child is abused. Every 46 minutes a juvenile commits a violent crime.

In Lynchburg alone, a women's shelter in our community sees over 200 women and 250 children per year. One in four in our community suffers from domestic violence. Residents with income that is below the poverty level in our community is 26.6 percent. Are we gaining ground or are we losing ground? Today we want to gain ground.

Thomas Road Baptist Church is a church that God placed here for a reason, not just to be a nice place, not just as a place for fellowship, not just a place to get together and enjoy our time together. God sent us here to be a lighthouse in darkness, to shine the light of God's love into a community to allow people to see who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, so that it and it alone can change people's lives. That is what we need to be about.

What happens so often is that churches become comfortable. What happens so often is churches are going about doing what they do and they do it well and they get to a point where they are doing it like a machine and everything is going great, everything is awesome, everything is moving along just perfectly and we forget that there are 111,334 people out there in our community that don't know Christ. What are we doing to reach them?

Adrian Rogers, a great pastor who is now in heaven, many years ago made a statement that is so powerful that I want us to always remember what he said. He said, "Every church will either evangelize or it will fossilize, but it will never stand still." That's a great quote, isn't it? Every church will either do what it's called to do, going out into its community to reach people with the Gospel, to share the Gospel of God's love with people, to share the message of the truth of God's Word with people, to let them know that God loves them, that God cares for them, that God sent His Son Jesus to die for them on the cross and He was buried and rose again, the message that God loves them. And the church will do that or the church will do nothing and begin to become nothing more than a blip on the radar of history in its community.

I'm just telling you that as long as I am the pastor of this church I will not allow Thomas Road Baptist Church to become nothing more than a blip on the radar screen of history in our community. We are going to evangelize our community. That is what we are going to do. Until there is literally not one person left in our community that has not heard the Gospel. As long as there is one that we can use as a statistic to say that they are unchurched, that they don't know Christ, as long as there is one still out there, we are going to be out there, we are going to go.

We ask ourselves the question: What are we going to do? How do we make sure that we are doing that? How do we make sure that we remain on mission? Colossians 1:9 and 10 says it this way, "For this reason, we also since the day we heard it do not cease to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will and all wisdom and spiritual understanding."

That is a great prayer that we ought to be praying, "God, we want to be filled with your wisdom. God, we want to know you, we want to have spiritual understanding."

It goes on in verse 10 with a punch list of what the church needs to be about, of what you and I need to be about. It says, "That you may walk worthy of the Lord [that's the lifestyle of worship we'll talk about next week], fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." That is a checklist for what the church needs to be doing, but how can we be sure that we are doing that? How can we be sure that we are gaining ground in the future? How can we be sure that we are making an impact, that we are changing our world? Because the easiest thing for a church to do is do nothing. The easiest thing for a church to do is to get comfortable and eventually fossilize into nothing more than a blip on the radar screen.

In fact, there is proof of that in Revelation 2. In Revelation 2, John, writing to the church at Ephesus, God says, "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.'”

That sounds like a description of a great church, doesn't it? It sounds like this is a church that is getting the job done, that is acting, that is making a difference, making an impact, changing its world. But notice what it continues to say in this passage, after hearing all the things that they are doing right, it says, verse 4, “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.”

This church at Ephesus was a great church that got comfortable, a great church that stopped doing what God has called us to do, and we can't let that be the story of our church. We've got to understand from this passage that there are important things we need to recognize.

The first one is this: Great starts don't always mean great finishes. We read in this passage what a powerful church this once was. In fact, if you go back about thirty years, this passage was written in about 90 to 95 AD. If you go back about thirty years in about 60 AD, when the book of Ephesians was written, we remember, we studied it just a few weeks ago, that Ephesians 1:15 Paul writes, “I celebrate because I have heard of your great love for God and for each other.”

This was thirty-some years earlier. “I've heard of your great love. We celebrate that.” A couple of years after that, Paul, writing the first letter to Timothy, in that passage he said, “I have heard that some have fallen away.” Two years after that he writes the second letter to Timothy, and in that letter he said, “I've heard that all have fallen away.”

Do you know where Timothy was serving? Timothy was serving in the church at Ephesus, the church that just a few years earlier Paul said, “I celebrate, I rejoice because I have heard of your great love for God and each other.”

Now in this passage of Revelation 2, “You're a great church, you've done some great things, you're impacting your world, but I have this against you: you've left your first love.” Great starts don't always result in great finishes. You have to keep your hand to the plow, staying committed, staying moving, staying impacting your world, staying adapting, understand what saturation evangelism means. It means reaching every available person at every available time by using every available means—even when the word *every* makes you uncomfortable. Doing things that you maybe are not fully comfortable doing, that's what we've got to be doing, because it all comes down to that four-letter word: *love*.

Great starts don't guarantee great finishes, but also we understand that strong doctrine doesn't always equal a loving heart. We read this passage, verses 2 and 3, it talks about how this is a church, “I know your works,” he says, “your labor, your patience, your perseverance. You're doing all the right things over and over again. You're doing it. You're standing on the Word of God. You're holding fast to the Word of God. You know what's right and what's wrong. When you hear something that goes against the Word of God, you know it and you stand up against it. You preach against it. You are making sure that no false doctrine is going to come in and destroy your church. You are doing all of those things.”

They have strong doctrine, just like Thomas Road. We have strong doctrine here. We believe the Bible is the Word of God. It's inerrant, it's infallible, it's inspired. Every word is breathed directly from the heart of God into the heart of man to tell us how to live and tell us how to lead, how to walk our lives, how to do everything. There is not a mistake in its pages. But strong doctrine does not always equal a loving heart.

That church at Ephesus stood on doctrine. "Nevertheless, I've got this against you. You've left your first love. You don't love me the way you once did. You don't love each other the way you once did."

Jesus, in talking about love in John 13:34 and 35 said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

The statement Jesus is giving is this: "You talk about how can we live our lives so people can see Christ in us? It's not carrying around the biggest Bible, it's not showing up at church every time the doors are open, it's not talking about how good a Christian you are; it is about showing the love of God to the world. That is how they will know that you are my disciples."

"Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Strong doctrine doesn't always equal a loving heart. So this church that has fallen away from its first love, they begin to realize and understand that only a change of heart will change a church. Pastors can't change a church. Deacons can't change a church. Sunday school leaders can't change a church. Life group leaders can't change a church. Worship leaders can't change a church. Great music can't change a church. A changed heart is the only thing that can change a church.

In this passage he said, "You have left your first love." He goes on to say, "Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen. Repent and do the first works." Those words *remember* and *do*, you get the idea of remember, repent. Remember what it is that God has done for you. Remember God's great love for you that He sent Jesus to die on the cross for you and you came to that place where you recognize that you are a sinner in desperate need of a Savior and you called on the name of the Lord and God answered your prayer and He kept His promise and He saved you. Remember that. But now repent of the fact that you've forgotten how really awesome that is. Repent of the fact that you have forgotten that life change that took place, that transformation that only Jesus can bring.

Repent of that, and then after you have repented, go back and do what God has called you to do, because I promise you this, from this passage we get a very clear statement that if we don't, God will never use an unloving church. God will never use an unloving church. Look how this passage ends. It says, "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."

That idea of the word *lampstand* is to remove your effectiveness, remove your impact, remove your blessing. “I will take my hand off of you if you don’t repent.” God help us if that is what can be said of this church in the days to come.

Remember, repent, repeat. Not long ago I was speaking in Dothan, Alabama. I had the opportunity to go down on a Monday night and preach to a wonderful church there in Dothan. Jason Schonfelder, our executive pastor, and I traveled. We got on a flight out of Lynchburg and flew down to Dothan. We arrived early in the afternoon and I didn’t speak until that night and we were wondering what we could do, so as oftentimes I like to do we look up historical facts of the community to find out what is going on there, to see what happened there in the past, something of interest. And I quickly found in Dothan, Alabama, well, really nothing happened of interest there.

But I did find that not far from there, about forty miles away, is a place called Enterprise, Alabama, a community where something very incredible happened. Back around the turn of the 20th century, in 1900, Enterprise was a thriving community. There were farms all through that area raising cotton and they would do incredible things and people were making money and families were getting rich and farms were growing and the crops were overflowing, and this was a boom town, and they loved everything about what was happening in Enterprise, Alabama, a cotton-growing capital. It was incredible.

But then around 1910-1912 something happened, and what happened was the boll weevil. It’s the kind of beetle that is indigenous to Mexico, and it somehow showed up in Enterprise, Alabama. By about 1915 this boll weevil, millions of them, had begun destroying every cotton farm in the area. Entire farms were destroyed. Farmers had lost everything. Cotton crops did not exist anymore. The entire community now that just a few years earlier had been celebrating their great fortune, had been celebrating all the wonderful things that were happening, were now finding themselves at the place of “What do we do? There is no hope. We’ve lost everything. What do we do now?”

Until one man in 1915 had an idea. One man came up with a plan. His name was H. M. Sessions. He said, “Here’s an idea. Why don’t we stop growing cotton and start growing peanuts?”

The people thought he was crazy. They said, “All we know how to do is plant cotton. It’s all we know. It’s all we’ve ever done. It’s all we’ve ever been involved in. It’s what we are comfortable with. We can’t begin to grow peanuts because we know how to grow cotton.”

But he found one man who lost everything already so he had nothing else to lose and he decided to give it a chance, so this one farmer began doing what Mr. Sessions told him to do and they began planting peanuts. Within a couple short years, what had been complete and utter destruction in that community had now grown that community to be the peanut capital of the world. Everything had been changed because they stopped planting cotton and they started planting peanuts.

What’s remarkable about Enterprise, Alabama, today is the fact that if you drive down the main street of Enterprise you’ll see something totally unbelievable, and if you don’t know the story,

you'd question why in the world is it there, because now on the main street of Enterprise, Alabama, is a monument, a beautiful fountain and pedestal with a goddess standing on top of the pedestal, and in her hands is a boll weevil. It's a monument to a bug that they erected in 1919, and on the inscription it says, "In profound appreciation of the boll weevil and what it has done as the herald of prosperity, this monument was erected by the citizens of Enterprise, Alabama."

They erected a monument to a boll weevil because that boll weevil that brought destruction, that brought them to the place where they thought there was no hope because all that they knew how to do was plant cotton, one man said, "Why don't we plant peanuts?" and it changed an entire community.

I've got a question for you: Are we as a church willing to stop planting cotton and start planting peanuts to change our community? Are we willing to step out of what we know and what we're comfortable with and what we like and what we enjoy and what we have always done to step out of the past, to step into our greater future because God has called us to reach our community? Are we willing to do that? I'm just telling you as one person, as the pastor of this great church, let it be said of this great church, beginning today, that Thomas Road Baptist Church will forever be planting peanuts.

That's a great quote, isn't it? People are going to be tweeting that and people are going to think, "They're crazy over there." That's okay. If it brings people to the cross, let them call us crazy all day long. I don't care.

So today, in that story one man was willing to step out. One man was willing to do something different. One man was willing to step out of what he was comfortable with. Are you? Today are you willing to step out of your comfort zone? A church will either evangelize or fossilize, but it will never stand still. We're not going to let this church fossilize. We're not going to let this church go backwards. We're not going to relish our past while forsaking our future. We are going to stand together and walk together and in the coming weeks and months we're going to be talking about and doing and sharing things that we as a church are going to be out there in our community doing that the whole world might say, "What in the world is that church doing?"

And the answer will always be this: We are going to reach every available person at every available time by using every available means, and we're going to keep doing it until Jesus comes back. And my goal is in the next five years that 111,334 that we talked about earlier, that number will go down to 100,000 because of this church and because of other churches in our community who quite simply said this: What Satan meant for evil, God means for good. We're going to change our community, we're going to stand up against the culture, we're going to change our world.

That's what we're going to do, and I ask you as a church, as members of this great family, to stand with me, to do this with me, to walk together. I can't do it, you can't do it, but when we get together, my friends, we will change our town, we will change our community, we will change our world, and one day we will be able to erect a monument outside there and we'll put this beautiful fountain out there and we'll put somebody up there holding up his hands and we'll put

something in it and say, “There was a day when we decided to stop planting cotton and we started planting peanuts, and history has forever been changed.”

My question is: Are you going to walk this journey with me? Are you going with me? I’m going. I’m walking this journey. As a church, we are moving forward. We are going to be doing that. We’re walking down that road, and I need every single one of you to just simply say, “God, here am I. Use me. God, here am I, with all my problems and all my faults, with all my challenges. God, here I am, send me.”

Are you willing to go?

[Praying] God, today we thank you for your Word. We thank you for what it means. We thank you for what it does. We thank you for how it changes us, how it transforms us. We thank you that you loved us so much that you allowed your only Son to die for us, and that He rose again the third day so that we might have life. He paid the debt for our sin that we couldn’t pay, the penalty that we could never have paid. He paid it for us because you loved us that much. God, thank you. And God I pray that now, as we talk about this community, as we talk about 111,000 people out there that don’t know the story, that old, old story of the Old Rugged Cross, God, send us, use us, change this community, and God help it to begin not in this building, help it not to begin even in this church; help it to begin in our hearts, because that is where revival starts.

(Singing: “Use Me”)

Before you leave today I’m asking you that beginning today and in the weeks to come we’re going to be talking about what planting peanuts really looks like. Trust me, I’m not a farmer, so don’t worry about that. But we’re going to talk about what it means for our church, and I’m going to ask you to make the commitment that you’re going to be here and you’re going to listen and you’re going to open your heart and you’re going to pray, “God, whatever it is, use me.”

I truly want to see this community—Lynchburg and Appomattox, Amherst, Bedford, Campbell—radically transformed with the Gospel. And I’m crazy enough to believe that the God of the universe can still do something amazing here today. I believe that with all my heart, and I’m asking you to walk with me on this journey. I’m asking you to be here next week and the week after and the week after because I’m going to be sharing with you some things that God has laid on my heart that I promise you some of you will think I’m crazy and some of you will think, “That’s not a good thing for a church to be involved in.” Some of you will think, “Do we really want to go in that direction, because that’s not what we’ve always done?” It’s going to be a challenge for all of us, but as long as there is one lost person in this community, I’m willing to do anything that points people to Christ in a God-honoring, doctrinal way. I am willing to do it and I ask you to walk this journey with me.

Keywords: Colossians 1, Revelation 2, love of God, saturation evangelism, Jerry Falwell, Thomas Road Baptist Church, boll weevil, enterprise, sharing the Gospel, getting out of comfort zone, reaching the lost