

Interview

Dr. James Earl Massey

by Art Azurdia



*James Earl Massey, D.Div., D.D., Hum.D., Litt.D. is Dean Emeritus and Distinguished Professor-at-Large of the Anderson School of Theology in Anderson, Indiana. Beginning in 1954, he served for twenty-two years as senior pastor of the Metropolitan Church of God in Detroit. Taking a leave of absence in 1963, he became Principal of the Jamaica School of Theology in Kingston, Jamaica, for three years. Then, in 1969, he began serving concurrently as campus minister and professor of New Testament and Preaching at Anderson University. For five years, Dr. Massey was the speaker on "The Christian Brotherhood Hour," the international radio broadcast of the Church of God. From that platform, his weekly messages were heard throughout the English-speaking world. In 1984, he was appointed Dean of the University Chapel and Professor of Religion and Society at Tuskegee University in Alabama. He later returned to Anderson University to assume the post of Dean of the School of Theology. Dr. Massey is the author of several works, including *The Responsible Pulpit*, *Designing the Sermon*, *The Burdensome Joy of Preaching*, and *Sundays in the Tuskegee Chapel*. He has preached and lectured at over one hundred colleges, universities, and seminaries in the United States and on four continents and is a frequent featured speaker at national preaching conferences and workshops.*

I first met Dr. James Earl Massey seven years ago in Dallas, Texas. We were both keynote speakers at the *E. K. Bailey International Conference On Expository Preaching*. From the first moments of his preaching I knew he would become something of a mentor to me—if only from afar. His commitment to the inspired text, prophetic quality, and unique clarity distinguished his ministry and captured my respect. Subsequently—and as an exceedingly kind providence to me—we have shared ministry on several occasions during which I have become acquainted with him on a more personal level. As such, his evident wisdom, integrity, and godliness have won a place in my affections that are reserved for only a few. Some months ago we enjoyed a meal together at a restaurant in Portland and our conversation turned to preaching, given the fact that he has endured in this ministry for sixty years.

Art Azurdia: Well, let's begin with the most obvious. How did you know you were called to preach?

James Earl Massey: I was sitting in a worship service. As a music student in high school, it was my custom at that time to carry with me a score of music while riding on the bus or on the street car. I would study the score, examining the notation and the structure of the music, so that when I would sit down at the piano my memorization process would not be as long. That particular Sunday morning I was studying a score of Chopin's preludes. The spirit of the service caught me at some point and I lifted my attention from the score to what was happening in the pulpit.

AA: So you were looking at the score during the service?

JEM: Yes.

AA: So there is hope for our children yet!

JEM: Yes, and I heard a voice speak to me in my conscience, saying, just as vivid as your voice is to me now, “I want you to preach.” The voice did not startle me, but I knew I had a challenge. The voice sounded familiar and yet of a higher order. I knew I had been ordered to do something, and I knew I would have to say “yes.” So I immediately responded within myself saying “yes,” and I turned to the person sitting beside me. We had not come together, but just happened to be sitting beside each other. I interrupted her worship and said, “You know what I am going to do with my life?” She said, “No James; what?” I said, “I am going to be a preacher.” She was a solid Christian girl and she said, “Why, that’s wonderful, that’s wonderful!” That was my first encouragement. Suppose she had thrown cold water on it? She didn’t. After that I informed my father and my mother. My father was a minister.

AA: Oh, is that right?

JEM: Yes. I also informed my pastor. He took me under his wing as did my father and they coached me in the way a father and a pastor are able. But since that high, holy moment of hearing I have known the work to which my head, my hands, and my heart must be given. And through thick and thin, sunshine and storm, I have known that this is the course my life must follow. I have never retreated from this path.

AA: Well, given the fact that you have given so many years to this . . .

JEM: That was more than sixty years ago.

AA: Is that right? Well, after having done this for sixty years, would you please describe the non-negotiables that define your approach to preaching? A lot has transpired during those sixty years.

JEM: Yes, I’ve seen the rise of neo-orthodoxy, the demise of neo-orthodoxy, the flagrant days of liberalism, and the death of liberalism – in the pulpit at least. Then came the penchant for topical preaching, and then the rise of narrative preaching, but all along there were those doing the steady work of *expositional* preaching, and that’s one non-negotiable with me. **I must preach from a text. I refuse to prepare a sermon without a text, for I take seriously Paul’s injunction to Timothy, found in 2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word.”** I believe the word has been given and we don’t have to seek it. It is inscripturated so we can read it. It is available to us at all times: morning, noon, or night. The Lord speaks by means of the inscripturated Word. We don’t get off task by following hunches or little whims. A text is non-negotiable to me.

AA: Amen.

JEM: Another non-negotiable is the needs of people in relation to what the text is saying, so that the text is matched to the times and tenor of people’s lives. I don’t want to talk about the Jebusites when somebody is in bereavement. It all has to be correlated with people and their need.

AA: Yes, of course.

JEM: Another non-negotiable for pastoral preaching is that the pastor needs to know the congregational members. Consequently, **the mega-church phenomenon doesn’t appeal to me from a pastoral standpoint because the mega-church leader does not know the people intimately enough to deal with them family by family.** There is a great deal of programming but not a great deal of pastoring – not by the leaders of the church, at least. **I believe the pastor is the one who ought to know the most about the people so that he can preach the word to them in a relevant manner.** This is a non-negotiable for me. I visited my people when I was pastoring; I visited the homes of my members – a large congregation of almost eight hundred. Moreover, I engaged in counseling and crisis situations within the community. It can all be done if the pastor has a heart for people.

AA: One of the things that both convicted and encouraged me about *The Burdensome Joy Of Preaching* – and these are my own words summarizing what you said much more eloquently – is that you talk about the need for preachers to love and care for the people to whom they preach. I remember where I was sitting on the plane when I read those words and felt so challenged and convicted. What counsel would

you give to a pastor who is saying at this moment, "I am not sure I love my congregation anymore." Does this signal the end of his effectiveness? Must he move on? How do you challenge a brother who says to you, "Dr. Massey, I don't know that I really care for these people any longer?"

JEM: Allow me to begin answering your question by telling a story. An older friend of mine who is now deceased was at one time hearing complaints from his congregation. They insisted they needed a new pastor. He'd been there for some twenty-two years. Instead of fussing, fuming, and taking it out on them in sermons, he decided he'd go into his study and close the door behind him. He spent his time fasting and in prayer, determined not to come out until he felt the Lord had freed him to do so. He stayed all week long. Saturday had come now, and Sunday was coming up. Something had to be done. He felt the Lord had blessed him sufficiently that he could come out and go home. But when he stood in his pulpit the next Sunday morning, the congregation had a new pastor.

The person who has lost love for his people might never have had it in the first place. Or, they might not have been sent by God to where they are. Or, they might have been too busy with the things of the world or their own little toys that they didn't take their job seriously enough to fall in love with the people. At any rate, they can be renewed if they will take some time with God alone. That's the way to renewal. The prophets went through it. The burdens they carried were too much for anyone to share, other than God. So they resorted to the desert. Moses went to the mountain. When he came down, he had enough for the people. The prophets had full instructions on what they were to do when they got back to the people. **The secret to ministry is being in the presence of God enough to hear enough, enough to get enough, and enough to be sent forth with enough. That's the secret of pastoral ministry.** It is not our work. It is that of Christ.

AA: Dr. Massey, it seems that a predominant pastoral model I'm seeing today is the model of the pastor as CEO. Now, some men are even referring to themselves as "the visionary pastor," which often seems to translate into such sentiments as: "Don't bother me with people. I want to set the direction. I don't want to dirty my hands with real life needs." What kind of impact does that have on preaching?

JEM: Well, as long as preachers follow the business model, they'll be thinking of statistics, the bottom line, and quote appeal when the real appeal is the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon one's life and work. This was the appeal Jesus had. The common people heard him gladly because he was speaking to their need. They came to Jesus. He sought the individual and the crowds sought him. That's not original to me. I read that in George Buttrick's *Jesus Came Preaching*. But the principle is true. If there is a genuine interest in people individually, the crowds will seek us out because they will hear of our concern for them. And the visionary pastors - the Lord bless their souls - if the vision has to come from us, then we had better be there to implement it. But if it comes from God, He will give us those at our side to help us fulfill it.

AA: Homileticians such as Robert Smith and Bryan Chapell talk about the need for preaching to be Christocentric. To what extent does the message of the gospel intersect with the sermons you preach?

JEM: The basic motivation for any sermon has to be in a kind of ellipse. At one point in the ellipse there is concern for human need. The other point in the ellipse is the purpose of Jesus and his continuing ministry. Now, if there is a human need at one end of the ellipse, and Jesus has a ministry at the other end of the ellipse that will meet the person who has a need, we put that person who has the need in touch with the One who can meet that need. That's what the sermon is about - getting them connected with the One who can meet their need: namely Jesus. So, in that sense, every sermon must be Christocentric whether it's a sermon on doctrine or a sermon on some duty to be performed. Christ must be there in it with his ministry, showing the person who hears the sermon how they are involved and can be assisted. Of course, it is possible to preach about Christ in such a way that one does not help people get a need met. It's possible to preach about Him in such a way that people feel condemned. But to preach about Him in such a way that He appeals from His ministry to their human hurt - that is a Christocentric sermon.

AA: We don't hear a lot of Christocentric preaching as you have described it. We hear a lot of moralizing, a lot of self-help kinds of messages. It's the danger of dividing the moral imperatives from the redemptive indicatives. What have you found to be the particular temptations common to those called to preach?

JEM: Well, there's a whole list of them. There's the temptation to be professional in order to be on par with the professionals in our community. There's a temptation to be sensational in order to draw a crowd. There's a temptation to be erudite so we can appeal to the learned. There's a temptation to be practical to appeal to those who always want to see the sense of things. Sometimes, however, we have to preach in a way that does not seem to be practical to anyone, particularly when we're preaching on eschatological subjects. There's also the temptation to be safe so we don't deal with prophetic issues. There's a temptation to be secularistic so we don't appear to be too spiritual. And then there are the other basic human temptations which go without saying. I think the greatest temptation is to try to be God-like in an authoritarian fashion. This is especially true if one uses his pastoral authority in an unloving manner to corral one's board members and to order the congregation in such a way that the pastor is the controller rather than the facilitator or encourager. All of these are temptations.

AA: Temptations driven by what kind of underlying ambitions, Dr. Massey?

JEM: Well, the base of all of this can be fear. There can be other things, too. But I think, basically, there is fear – fear that I will not be received and given my due, fear that I will be undermined, fear that I will not be effective. At the core even of Adam and Eve's sinning was the fear they would miss out on something if they didn't take the suggestion Satan offered. At the core of human failure is fear.

AA: Have you known seasons in ministry in which there seems to be very little – if any – fruitfulness? How do you preach through those kinds of seasons?

JEM: Ah, yes. There come those times we might call "dry." It seems that you are speaking a word that is only a word, over and against those times when you are speaking a word that you know has life because you feel lifted when you speak it. There come those dark nights of the soul when you're doing it out of duty and feel no desire. I recall one morning I was up in the pulpit preaching and I had been through a horrid time of great pressure with so many activities that were pulling upon me. I was not aware of how tired I was. But as I was preaching, I felt myself drifting apart and I could see myself speaking while I was standing separate, looking on as I spoke. I finally came back into oneness and I've never had that experience again. But I have learned that you must sometimes yield the pulpit to someone else when you are overly pressed because the body is a part of one's ministry. If we are too tired it asserts itself in ways that will undermine what the spirit of ourselves is trying to be. And I think that is what happened to Elijah after he went through that great time mentioned in I Kings – the battle of the false prophets. He was drained. No wonder he went out into the wilderness and sat under a tree. But interestingly enough, the angel came and fed him and the ravens came and fed him. And he was there by the brook where he could drink. Water at a time of tiredness is the best thing we can have even if we don't eat much to keep the system regulated. Many people don't understand that eating isn't the key to health. Proper liquids in the system is the proper key to health.

AA: You're certainly not a Gnostic. The body is important, and there are times when, maybe, the most spiritual thing we can do is sleep.

JEM: That's right.

AA: How have you dealt with the criticisms that have been aroused by your preaching?

JEM: There are two ways of looking at that: 1) In what ways are my critics right – so that I can learn how best to do it next time? And, 2) In what ways are my critics wrong – so that I can be encouraged to keep at my task? Even a clock that has stopped is right twice a day. So my critics can be right on at least this or that point even if they're wrong on others.

AA: You strike me as a person, Dr. Massey, who has never stopped learning. It's one of the things I really admire about you. What are you still learning about preaching after sixty years?

JEM: **One thing that is crystal clear to me – which experience has taught me - you can never master the art of preaching. It is always something toward which you are working, so that sermonizing is always a work in progress. You leave the pulpit saying, “Well, I flunked that time, but I’ll try again. Maybe next time I’ll get it right.”** One of my mentors, Howard Thurman, used to say, “There is a word that God has been trying to say through me, and three-fourths of the time I just have not gotten it straight.” One year, I was preaching at Eastern Mennonite University for the Staley Lectureship. On the evening of my last sermon, I had to leave immediately after the service to catch a plane, so I was timing myself very carefully. The week had been so productive for many of those in attendance that they lined the aisle way as I was coming down out of the pulpit with the campus minister because they wanted to shake my hand. And so, I took a moment just to touch them as I was going by. I noticed a young lady who was standing out in the vestibule (or the narthex as it's called in some places) watching me as I was greeted by everybody. She didn't shake my hand, but stood off to the side. When I approached her and greeted her she said, “I'm *praying* for you.” (Did you notice the tone I used?) I responded, “I'm grateful for that. Thank you.” She continued, “I'm praying that God will keep you humble.” I again thanked her. I realized immediately that she was probably from some group where the minister was often given accolades, and was wondering whether I needed to be told not to take this too seriously. I appreciated what she said as I understood from where she was coming. But if she only understood that whenever I preach I always feel I messed up and need to work harder to get it right the next time she might have had a different tone. But I thanked her nevertheless. It is possible for preachers to lose their bearings and think that they are really great if the invitation is responded to with seekers or if, in some settings, the shouting is great and the amens are very vociferous. I understand all of that, but I haven't needed any of that. In my pastorate I wanted people to hear me.

AA: Dr. Lloyd-Jones says, “In my life I've really only preached three times . . . And, on each occasion I was dreaming.”

JEM: I like that very much.

AA: I very much enjoyed the book, *Preaching In Black And White*. The dialogue between E.K. Bailey and Warren Wiersbe is excellent. In your view, what are the lessons (generally speaking) that Anglo preachers need to learn from their African American brothers? And then I'd like to flip the question: What are the lessons African American preachers need to learn from their Anglo brothers?

JEM: I think those who are from a different tradition than the African-American preacher, (although African American preaching is not monolithic), can glean two primary things: 1) Freedom of expression or expressiveness; abandoning oneself to one's message; and, 2) Trusting the people to respond as they feel to respond. When we trust the people to respond where they feel to respond, it doesn't throw us off base if they say an “amen” when we're in the middle of a paragraph. I remember having an Anglo minister in my pulpit when I was in Detroit. After having made a good point one of the members said, “Say that again!” It startled him. She said he turned and looked at her, so she nodded to him in order to say, “Go on and say it again!” She was responding as she felt, but he was not accustomed to that. It threw him off base. But as he said it again he regained his composure and it freed him up. So those two things are essential: letting the people respond as they feel to respond and abandoning yourself to the truth you're seeking to share. Now, I think we can learn from Anglos at the point of being more responsible in planning the sermon before we get to the pulpit, mapping it out more carefully. The average Anglo preacher tends to put a lot of time into what is to be said. Many from our context (African-American) assume that since they know their people they can cut some corners. I don't think they do this selfishly, but it does shortchange our people if we are not giving the full argument. If we are not giving the full reasoning from the text, if we're not giving the full stages in the textual development, we're shortchanging our people. We need to do that rather than assume we can just jump from one aspect of the text to the next without treating the full emphasis that's in the text. The second thing I think we can learn from Anglo preachers is that we don't need as much time as we normally take.

AA: But that's the reason I like to hang out with you guys! At these conferences we've done together people are so concerned to hear the word of God that they're not sitting there, looking at their watch, saying, "Applebee's . . . Applebee's . . . Applebee's . . . when's lunch?" And that means everything to me.

JEM: I understand, but unless the congregation has been trained that way it's best not to afflict them. Whet their appetite so they'll ask for more rather than load up their plate and leave with more than half of it to hide.

AA: Given the fact that good preaching is more often caught than taught, who would you suggest as models to whom aspiring preachers should listen?

JEM: Let me deal first with those who have written rather than those who are on the scene now as known speakers. I'll tell you why. Those who are entering the ministry now are suffering from some of the lack that is in American education. They do not know how to write, they do not know how to organize, and they do not know how to phrase things. So I would suggest those who are entering the ministry now would learn by reading the great ones of the previous century who have written or whose works in sermon form have been preserved in writing by others. Transcribed sermons ought to be the texts they are studying to learn the art of delivery.

AA: And who would you encourage they read?

JEM: Ralph W. Sockman, George A. Buttrick, and E. Halford Luckock are all wonderful. I would also suggest Harold J. Ockenga, Peter Marshall, and Clovis G. Chappell. All of these men were good organizers. All of them were masters of the English language. **In a day when we've given ourselves to text messaging, and everything is in such short form, we need to learn the extension of an argument which is what this new generation does not understand well - because the text will always put us into the middle of an argument in the positive sense of the word.** Something is being said that carries the burden of truth and all aspects of that argument have to be dealt with in order for the truth to have its major effectiveness. So the young generation needs to have that in particular. A second thing I would suggest is that they study the times in which those whom they are studying had to speak, so that they can see the person's work in context. And then, if they have any talent at all for preaching, something will click in the brain so that they will be able to transfer what they are learning to their own pulpit. But many do not have the talent and we have to recognize that.

AA: That we can't put in what God's left out?

JEM: Yes. Those are the two things I would suggest.

AA: That's certainly a distinguishing aspect, Dr. Massey, of your own preaching. Of all the things that could distinguish it, there is an overwhelming sense of clarity when you speak - where you're going and what you're doing. I think that some of our young folk tend to despise the sense of organization. They think that it's not authentic and not real. Some might even suggest it's not spiritual.

JEM: It finally comes to a point rather than beginning with a point in view.

AA: If you were given one final sermon to preach, and the congregation comprised of pastors and preachers exclusively, what text would you choose and what would you say?

JEM: I would choose 1 Timothy 1:12-17 (*paraphrase*):

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who hath enabled me for that He counted me faithful, putting me in the ministry, who before was a blasphemer - injurious, a persecutor - but I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And His grace and His mercy overflowed for me through the grace and the love which were in Christ Jesus. This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost. But for this very reason He showed mercy to me that in the foremost He might give an example of His graciousness. To the king immortal, invisible, God only wise, be glory and majesty and dominion forever. Amen.

I haven't quoted it verbatim, but that is the text I would use because **Christ is first and foremost and last in my life. I wouldn't have been in the ministry if it hadn't been for Him.**

AA: Thanks very much, Dr. Massey.

JEM: You're welcome, and thank you.