



Sundays Down South: A Pastor's Stories (Folklife in the South Series)

James O. Chatham

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Perhaps the best way to portray that unique cultural phenomenon called "Southerners" is by telling tales about how these particular people live. And who could perceive them better, heart and soul, than their preacher? James O. Chatham, a Presbyterian minister who served several congregations during four decades, witnessed to a full spectrum of Southern types during his years in the pulpit. He met all kinds, and he strived to minister to each with a compassionate, pastoral hand.

His book of tales about his experiences with them puts a human face on the southern portrait. In Sundays Down South: A Pastor's Stories he recounts experiences with people who were both heroic and pathetic, wise and foolish, visionary and blind. "Two things I have taken from these [stories]," he says. "One is the insight that the most sturdy and courageous hearts often come in very plain packaging. The other is the importance of conviction, of having in your soul a motivating cause."

He preached in a variety of southern locales--a paper mill town in the mountains of western Virginia, two small communities in southwestern Mississippi, a tobacco town in Piedmont North Carolina, and a city on the edge of Kentucky's bluegrass region. The people he encountered in his pastorates are flawed but charming, even admirable in some instances. "It is impossible," he says, "to tell from the outside who the giants will be. You have to be attentive, to watch and listen carefully, sometimes to dig to uncover the people you really want to meet."

Religion, race, sex, family ties, economic hardship, health, and education all arise in these tales, and Chatham never condemns or accuses. Nor does he shy from an honest portrayal of reality and of the prejudice that persists in the South. With a poignant but plain style, he makes clear his love for his parishioners and his attempt to infuse their lives with the inspired dignity that has moved him through a lifetime of preaching and listening.

James O. Chatham has been pastor of Highland Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, since 1981. He has published articles in *Word and Witness*, *Today's Teacher*, the *Winston Salem Journal*, and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.



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