

Sermon for Sunday, May 16, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor  
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"IS JESUS YOUR BAG?"

II Corinthians 5:17-21

Text: "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come." II Corinthians 5:17

Are you a religious person? Do you believe in God? And of course you come to church from time to time because you are here this morning. It may come as a surprise to you, but Jesus didn't like "religious" people. It was to religious people to whom Jesus said, "Many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the Kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." It was to religious people--people, I suspect, who were very much like you and me to whom Jesus said, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness...how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" And that's pretty strong language to use about religious people.

There was a man in the time of Jesus named Nicodemus. He was a religious man. Why he even belonged to the high council of the temple. One night this religious man went to visit Jesus. He didn't want to be seen with Jesus in the light of day--after all, he was a religious man, not a fanatic--so he went at night. And to this religious man, Jesus said, "You must be born again."

So Jesus isn't interested in whether you are religious or not. What he really wants to know is, "are you born again?" But that's Bible language isn't it? Let's try it on for size in modern terms. Have you had a personality transformation? Or try this one: have you had a re-orientation of your ego center? Or how about this: have you redirected the focus of your loyalties to a spiritual dimension? Or maybe this one will help: Is Jesus your bag?

Maybe you don't know what your bag is this morning--maybe you don't know who you are or whose you are. Maybe you are religious, but maybe you don't know if you have been born again or not. Well, let me give you three tests that you can take to tell if you are a born again Christian. These three tests come from St. Paul. In the Scripture we read this morning he wrote, "If any man is in Christ..." then certain things happen to him. So let's take our spiritual pulse this morning and see how well we do.

Here is test one. St. Paul says that any man who is in Christ is a new creation. That is, you have a before and an after. There is a sharp line drawn through your life. I don't believe anyone really just slides into being a Christian any more than one just sort of unconsciously becomes married. You may date a person many months. You may love each other very dearly. You may want to spend the rest of your lives together. But until you come to a moment in time before some proper authority and say, "I do" you are not married. Now, you may not act much differently towards your new bride, but everything is changed--you have a new relationship. So it is with Jesus. I know of a man who served for some years as the dean of a college--he was a pastor--and then he went to a church. One of his members, a very humble man, came to him and said, "Pastor, I want to ask you, have you been born again?" He said, "How dare you ask your pastor a question like that. Don't you know that for a good number of years I was the dean of a Christian college?" The man said, "Yes sir, but Pastor I want to know were you born again?" He said, "How dare you ask me. Don't you know that I have four degrees, two of them from the outstanding seminary in our denomination?" He said, "Yes pastor, I know, but were you born again?" He said,

"No, I'm not." So they got down on their knees together there in his study and he gave his life to Jesus. He suddenly had a before and after. There was a sharp demarcation drawn through his life and he said, "You know, I haven't had so much fun in the pastorate in all my life." It made a difference. You may live a good life and be a moral person. You may love Jesus and believe he is the Son of God. But until you say, "I do" to Jesus--until this line of decision and commitment is drawn through your life, you are not a Christian. You are not born again. So the first test puts this question to you: have you said "yes" to Jesus and become a new creation, does your life have a "before and after."

In her book entitled "The Late Liz", Gert Bahannah tells us she was an alcoholic and a dope addict. When her third husband left her, she attempted to take her own life. No one could seem to reach this confused and lost woman. The only thing she used God for was to swear and the only Bible she had ever seen was the Guttenberg Bible in a museum. But a young couple told her about Jesus and when she had reached the end of her rope one day, she knelt to pray. As she tells it, she felt a presence there and she didn't need to ask who it was. Gert Bahannah rose from her knees a new creation, a born again person. A sharp line was drawn through her life and she had a "before and after."

Here is test two. What impact does your past have on your life? St. Paul writes, "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away..." Your past can do dreadful things to you. Alfred Lloyd Tennyson in his poem "Ulysses" makes his hero say, "I am a part of all that I have met." That is a magnificent insight into human existence. In a very real sense, we are our past. Now, that would be fine indeed if our past were all good and healthy and wholesome. But if it isn't, how does one escape from his past? If you have stolen, or cheated, or lied or committed adultery it takes its emotional pound of flesh. But how does one escape from old sins, old wounds, old deeds, old events that continue to rise up in the murky blackness of the unconscious mind and do emotional damage?

If you go walking on the clean white sand of an ocean beach you can look behind you and see your footprints leading back. No matter how hard you have tried to walk straight, when you stand and look back you see that your path has been crooked, erratic, a wandering trail. And that is a sort of parable on life. But wait a few hours and see what happens! At last the tide comes in. The mighty waters of the deep come moving across the beach. And then, when the tide goes out, the beach is clean and fresh. Your crooked trail is forever washed away. It is as though you had never passed that way.

I have a friend who was a chaplain who is out now. He was in Vietnam with his troops over there. He has written a book about his experiences and I understand they are dickering with him now to make a movie. But I heard him talk the other night down in Nashville, Tennessee. He was telling that for the first fifteen days they were out to sea on the troop ship he held a revival and talked about what it meant to become a Christian and a number of the young soldiers became Christian. One big, tall, broad shouldered young man came up to him after one of the services and said, "Chaplain, what you said in your sermon touched me tonight and I want to become a Christian." The chaplain said, "Indeed you shall" and he led him to Christ and the young man knelt and received Jesus as his Savior. A few days later the ship made the Philippine Islands and the commander gave all of the men shore leave. The chaplain was distressed. He said, "What about all my new Christians? They are going out into this sinful city and I can't possibly go with all of them. What's going to happen to these new Christians?" All night long the men staggered and crawled back aboard the ship. The next morning this tall, broad shouldered young man came to him and said, "Chaplain, I'm so mad." He said, "What's the problem?"

He said, "I saw one of our new converts in town last night and he was sinning. I'm going to go get him and I'm going to make him come confess to you and make him repent." The chaplain said, "You don't do things that way." He said, "Yes, I do. You watch me." In a minute here he came in dragging a young man by the arm. He said, "You get down on your knees right here before the chaplain and you repent." And the young man fell on his knees and did repent. His soldier friend who had dragged him there went down on his knees beside him and put his arms around him as he repented and prayed with him. But as he put his arm around him, his sleeve came up. And this young man had apparently done everything there was to do before he gave his life to Christ because there tattooed on his arm were these words "raise hell". That is a parable on life too isn't it? Here was a man who had a before and an after. His before said "raise hell" but his past had been wiped out and there he was on his knees with his arm around a fellow soldier as he prayed with him in repentance.

When we say "yes" to Jesus, that's what he does to our past. Emotional health, spiritual health begins in forgiveness. Like the relentless tide smoothing out the marks on a sandy beach, the precious blood of Jesus is able to wash out the marks of your past. He frees us from the emotional chains that shackle us to the past. When we say "Yes" to Jesus he forgives us and our past is wiped clean; it loses its influence over us. I remember reading the story of a boy who got into serious trouble that shamed both him and his parents and he ran away from home. Some years later he wanted to go home again so he wrote his parents. He told them he would be on a certain train that ran by their country home. If they forgave him and were willing for him to come back, they were to hang a sheet on the clothes line. When the fateful day came, when the train drew near the place, he could not bear to look. He asked the man sitting beside him to look out the train window and tell him if he saw a sheet on the line. "Boy," said the man, "the line is filled with sheets." That's how abundant the forgiveness of God is. Our past is gone and we are freed from its awful bondage.

Here is test three. How do you feel about the future? St. Paul writes, "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." Yes, how do you feel about the future? Gert Bahannah, whom I mentioned earlier, tells us that before she found Jesus she had no future. She had to have a drink to face the day, a drink from hour to hour to keep her going during the day, and then finally a drink to put her to sleep at night. Life does not work very well without a future. Do you know the most deadening thing, the most awful thing, about the poverty many Americans have? It is its hopelessness. There is no future. And life without hope is life that is hardly worth living. What sort of future do you have--and I mean all of the future, right on into the middle of eternity. Your earthly future is like money in the bank. When you have spent it, will you have anything worth while to show for it? When I stand before God to have the final part of my future determined, do you know what I fear the most? I fear the most that life will not have been well spent. What will it be like to stand at the end of life and look back to see nothing that has been truly worthwhile. What will matter then? Will the size of my bankroll? The size of my house? The newness or bigness of my car? What will really count? But with Jesus our future is secure. Life with Jesus is a future that will count. The future with Jesus in it is a future that will be worth something.

There they are. Three tests. What's your grade point? Do the tests results show that you are "in Christ," that Jesus is your bag? But maybe you flunked. Maybe you are a "Jesus drop-out." Is there any hope for you? Yes, there is. There is hope if you will make a start. You can start this morning by passing test one. Do you remember test one? You become a new creation. You draw a sharp line through



your life. You suddenly have a "before and after." And you can do that this morning by making a decision for Jesus Christ.

Once when the Romans were fighting the last of the Greek kingdoms established by Alexander the Great, the Roman general met with Antiochus, the Seleucian king. The Roman said to him, "What will it be, war or peace?" "I have not yet decided," said King Antiochus. The Roman drew his sword and made a circle around the feet of the king and said, "Give an answer before you step out of that circle or your answer is war." Sometimes not to decide is to say no. Where you sit this morning Jesus draws a circle of love around you and he says, "Decide before you step out of this circle or your answer is no."

Yes, that is test one--that is how to begin--to draw a line through your life, to have a "before and after," to decide for Jesus.

You ask me how I gave my heart to Christ? I do not know.  
There came a yearning for Him in my soul so long ago.  
I found earth's flowers would fade and die--  
I wept for something that would satisfy;  
And then--and then--somehow I seemed to dare  
To lift my broken heart to Him in prayer.  
I do not know--I can not tell you how;  
I only know He is my Saviour now.

Yes, "somehow," the poet said, "I seemed to dare." In the act of daring he passed test one for he became a new creation in Jesus. Now I dare you.