

Sermon for Sunday, August 15, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"SOME THINGS GOD CAN'T DO"

Acts 2:37-47

Text: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Acts 2:42

Little Sally was assigned a term theme on Abraham Lincoln. As she studied for the paper she came to admire this great American. She determined that in her paper she would give him all the credit he deserved. So, she wrote, "Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin he built himself." The moral of this story is, "there are some things you can't do for yourself."

In the realm of the spiritual there are certainly some things you can't do for yourself. For example, we can't forgive our own sins. Forgiveness of sins belongs to God. We may forget about our sins, ignore our sins, cover up our sins, but we can't forgive our own sins. Another thing we can't do for ourselves is to save ourselves eternally. The work of redemption is a holy sanctuary where only a Divine Saviour such as Jesus Christ can enter. The work of salvation demands a cross that only Jesus can bear. Jesus is the only one who can save us.

Another thing we can't do for ourselves is to born ourselves again--to give ourselves new hearts. Only God can do that. Only God can recreate us and beget us again. Only God can mend the brokenness within us and give us a new heart. Another thing we can't do for ourselves is to fill ourselves with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a gift of God. If God didn't offer to put his Spirit, the power of his presence, the living Jesus, within us, we could never do that on our own. Only God can fill us with the Holy Spirit.

So, there are some things that we cannot do for ourselves. On the other hand, there are some things that God can't do for us. There are some things that we must do for ourselves. For example, think with me for a moment about the cross of Jesus Christ. And as you picture him in the mind's eye hanging there, bearing on himself the sins of the world, ask yourself this question, "For whom did Jesus die?" Well, the answer to that is simple enough. The Bible tells us quite plainly that he died for all men. The Bible says that he died that "whosoever believeth on him might not perish." If Jesus died for all, does this mean that all are automatically saved? No, because the Bible says that "whosoever believeth." To be saved means to believe and that is something that each man must do for himself. God cannot believe for you or for me. Each of us must do that for ourselves. A wife can't do it, a mother can't do it, a saintly grandfather can't do it--no, there are some things that a man must do for himself.

For many of us, religion hasn't meant to us what we thought it would or what we hoped it would. We are not living triumphant, Christian lives. We are not happy, joyous Christians and we are disappointed about it. I would like to suggest that part of the reason is because we have lost the clear and sharp distinction between what God must do for us and what we must do for ourselves. Usually we are waiting for God to do something for us that we must do for ourselves. Sometimes we are confused about what is God's part and what is our part. We can't expect God to do our part. If we are waiting for a bolt of lightening or a tremendous emotional experience, we may be waiting for God to do something for us that we must do for ourselves. Because this is so, I would like to share with you some of the things you must do for yourself if you want to live a triumphant Christian life.

One of the things God cannot do for us is to repent for us. Now God may help you repent. For example, in the Scripture we read this morning the Bible tells us that as Peter preached about Jesus the people who listened were cut to the heart. Who cut their hearts? It was God. It was the Holy Spirit working in them. So God was leading them towards repentance. But when they cried out and said, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter told them that they must do something for themselves that God nor anyone else could do for them. He said, "Repent." Before God can save you or me, out of an act of our wills we must repent. Jesus can die for us, but he cannot repent for us. To repent is something you must do for yourself.

Now let me assure you that repentance is where salvation begins. And repentance is more than being sorry for your sins. Repentance involves moral reformation. In my first pastorate I had a young man who worked for the Post Office. Unfortunately, he became involved in some dishonest practices and was arrested. When he was brought to trial, I appeared in his behalf as a character witness. This was his first offense and I felt he deserved a second chance. In talking to the judge, I emphasized that he had a young family and since this was his first offense, I felt he deserved another chance and I commented to the judge, "Those of us who are concerned about him will work with him in making restitution." I will never forget how the judge leaned over the bench and said to me, "Young pastor, I am not so much interested in restitution as I am in reformation." If you are carrying on an affair, God can't stop for you. Only you can quit committing adultery. If you are lying, God can't quit for you. If you are stealing or cheating, God can't quit for you. If you are selfish and self-centered, if you are unfair in your personal relationships, if you are bad-tempered, intemperate, or whatever, God can't quit for you. You have to quit for yourself.

Do we really understand that? You see, often we are sorry for the things we do, but we don't quit doing them. Instead, we keep waiting for God to strike us with a spiritual thunderbolt so that we won't have to go through the agony and stress of breaking old habits and old patterns and old greeds. We want a miracle from God to make us morally perfect and God says we have to repent for ourselves--and repent in the biblical sense means to turn from our sins.

The moral nerve of many of us has been cut because we have either not understood or been willing to accept the fact that repentance belongs to man and not to God. Often we are deeply troubled because in our hearts we know something is wrong with our spiritual lives and we are vaguely waiting on God to do something. But repentance is our business--not God's. He can't do that for us. If you want to change your life, if you want to be something you know you are not, if you want to live a certain kind of life this morning, do not expect a spiritual miracle from God to suddenly make you into something you are not. Repentance is your business, not God's. You have to decide you want to be different. You have to make the effort of will to change. Now, it is true that once you make that decision and once you start trying to live a better life, God will help you. But in the beginning, repentance is your business, not God's. Until you bring your evil deeds, your sins, to the cross of Jesus to be disposed of God can't help you. At this point it all depends on you.

A second thing that God can't do for us is to have faith for us. Now, in one sense of the word faith itself is a gift from God, for as St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God..." (Eph. 2:8) But faith in the biblical sense means more than to believe something. Faith also means to act on that belief. Faith, then, means not only to believe something but to act on that belief, to live by that belief. And that is something we must do for ourselves. God can't act for us. So whether or not you act on your faith is entirely up to you.

See how it works. Most of you are here this morning because you believe in Jesus and by that you mean that intellectually you accept the things about Jesus the Bible says. Most of us believe that Jesus is the Lord of life and the Saviour of men. But--and here is the catch--that does not necessarily mean that we are being what he wants us to be day by day. Here is how it should operate. True faith means that we not only acknowledge that God is trustworthy, but that we begin to trust him. Not only do we acknowledge that God is worthy of honor, but by our lives we honor him. Not only do we acknowledge that God is worthy of obedience, but we begin to obey him. Not only do we acknowledge that his commandments are good and just and right, but we go on to follow them.

So God may give us our faith in one sense of the word, but it is never ours until we act on it. God can't do that for us--we must do that for ourselves.

But there is a third thing God can't do for you. God can't be obedient for you. Now, it is true that we can't earn our salvation by our good works for salvation is a work of God, a gift of God. On the other hand, it is also true that a man doesn't have salvation without obedience. The Bible knows nothing about salvation apart from obedience. St. Paul wrote that he was sent to preach "obedience to the faith among all nations." Even Jesus himself said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me..." (John 4:34) Yes, obedience--a hard word that we don't particularly like. But I am sorry to tell you that there is no use in trying to believe without intending to obey. There is no such thing in the Bible as faith without obedience.

In the area of sex--are you obedient? In the area of money--are you obedient? In the area of helping others--like in slum areas and poverty--are you obedient? In the area of your brothers--the black, the brown--are you obedient? In the area of the integrity of human relationships--are you obedient? You see, there is no such thing as faith without obedience.

No, there are some things we can't do for ourselves. We can't forgive our own sins; we can't make our own salvation for that demands a cross that only Jesus can bear; we can't give ourselves a new heart nor can we fill ourselves with the Holy Spirit. Only God can do those things. But there are some things that God can't do for us--some things we have to do for ourselves. God can't repent for us--we have to make up our own minds to turn from our sins. God can't have faith for us--to begin to act on his promises is something we have to do for ourselves. God can't obey for us--we have to make our own hard-nosed, clear-cut moral decisions, those deliberate acts of obedience to the commands of God.

You know, a lot of people have the idea that people are lost, damned, because they have rejected Jesus. That isn't true. Men are lost because they are sinners. A person just stays lost when he rejects Jesus. My guilt and my damnation is because of sin in my life and not because I reject Jesus. Jesus is God's remedy for sin, not the cause of it. If you have not accepted Jesus as your personal saviour this morning, it means you are already lost. God offers us every one salvation in Jesus Christ--he offers us forgiveness. And only God can do that. But to accept God's offer--to receive Christ as our saviour is our business. Only we can do that. Have you accepted him? You see, that is some thing you must do for yourself.