

Sermon for Sunday, December 2, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THERMOSTATS AND THERMOMETERS"

St. Matthew 21:1-10

St. Matthew 27:15-26

Text: "Pilate said to them, 'Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?' They all said, 'Let him be crucified.'" St. Matthew 27:22

We have been hearing a lot lately about our thermostats. Everybody wants us to turn them down but I'd like to point out to you that nobody has mentioned our thermometers to us. There is a reason for that. A thermometer merely reflects its environment. It simply measures what the situation is. It says what its environment says but a thermostat is different. A thermostat controls its environment. A thermostat can change the situation around it rather than merely reflect it.

Today, as we begin the Advent season in which we look forward to the coming of Jesus, I have been thinking a great deal about the birth of the Son of God. I've been thinking how there were those who hailed Him the Messiah and then turned around and rejected Him and in our world today it seems to me we see those who had once proclaimed Jesus now turning and rejecting Jesus and the church. I have been wondering what sort of world it would be like had he never come. The world is certainly bad enough--we see crisis follow crisis--but I've been wondering lately what would have happened had Jesus never come. You see, God began through Jesus to influence the environment of the world. The world turned from God. The world became sin. Man become broken. He became cut-off in his relationship to God. The world knew sin and it suffered the consequence of sin. But into that sinful environment God sent his Son. There in the midst of sin, through this Son, God began to change the environment. He began to shape and mold the complexion of mankind. When Jesus was born, God in a real sense turned on the spiritual thermostat. The world which had not known the possibility of forgiveness and right relationship to God in the birth of Jesus now experienced a new possibility--a new potential--the potential of change.

In our scripture this morning we read two incidents in the life of Jesus which occur within the span of six days. Apparently, the people involved in these two incidents are the same people. Yet, their reaction to Jesus is in direct contradiction. On Sunday they greet him with loud cries of "Hosanna and Glory to God in the highest," but by Friday tears of joy and welcome have changed to "Let him be crucified." Now obviously if these are the same people, they are not thermostats, they are thermometers. They are simply responding to and being controlled by something or someone in their environment. But behind the action of these people who have undergone such a radical flip-flop since Palm Sunday stands this sentence from our scripture, "Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the people to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus." Here are the real culprits. Here are the thermostats. Here are the ones who are reaching out to shape and control and manipulate their environment. Even Pilate who is in a key position turns out to be a mere thermometer who is himself simply a respondent to his environment reflecting what is happening. We read of him, "So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing...he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified." No, the real culprits, the ones in control, are the chief priests and the elders.

This leads me to the first observation we might make which is this: a person has to decide who and what he will be. You have to decide whether you will simply react to your environment, to life about you, to those with whom you live and be controlled by that or, whether you will be one of those who exert a controlling influence on

your environment. You might ask yourself that question this morning. How am I relating to the people about me, to the environment in which I live. Am I simply reflecting it in doing what everybody else does or am I exerting a controlling influence in the world in which I live? Now that's a fundamental decision that each of us has to make. Will we be chameleon-like and take on the color of our environment and background, or will we be one of the shaping, molding forces that determines the kind of world we are going to have? For example, I once had a Deacon who was violently opposed to drinking. When it came time for the Christmas office party, he was faced with the problem of what to do since there was always a lot of drinking. He was concerned that he was going to be in his working environment and he didn't drink. What was he going to do? Afterwards, I asked him how he managed and he replied, "Well, it was easy. I just put enough coke in some water to color it and nobody knew the difference." I'll tell you one thing. He surely was no thermostat! He was not exerting an influence on his environment. So, the first thing we have to decide is whether we will be a thermostat or thermometer--whether we are going to be people who shape and mold our world.

Perhaps some of us might like to end the whole matter right there. Some of us may feel that with the world being what it is today we do not want to assume the burden and responsibility for shaping our world. I think as we look back on the hippie movement of the sixties, in a real sense this is what they were trying to do. They lived in a world and in an environment that they rejected--they rejected the things it stood for, the values it had, the principles it exercised. They were repelled by it and so they attempted simply to avoid contact with the world and they withdrew. Pilate took that route. He wanted to have no responsibility for what happened that day. The Bible says that "He took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood....'" But somehow life does not work that way. We cannot disassociate ourselves from life no matter how much we might want to. We may simply reflect our environment and thereby strengthen it and confirm it or we may try to influence and shape our world. But there is really no third choice of washing our hands of the matter and refusing to bear any responsibility one way or the other. Pilate could give in to the wish of the Jews--which he really did--or he could refuse them. He could not wash his hands of responsibility. Neither can you or I today wash our hands of responsibility for the world we live in.

So, the first choice we have to make as human beings is whether to be a thermometer or a thermostat. What kind of persons are we going to be? What kind of humans are we going to be? The second decision we have to make is not only are we going to influence our environment or simply reflect it--the second decision we have to make is if we decide to influence our environment will it be for good or bad? Will it be constructive or destructive? Now, I want to ask you that question: What kind of influence are you having on the environment in which you live? What kind of force are you in the lives of people around you. Are you a good force? Positive, constructive force? Or are you a negative destructive force? Without a doubt Adolph Hitler was a thermostatic figure. He shaped and molded his environment and in the process changed the history of the world. Yet, few would call his impact on the world good.

On the other hand, there have been many who have given their lives in an effort to make them count for good. Famous names come to mind such as Louis Pasteur, Madame Curie, Thomas Edison and many others. But on a more personal level each of us know simpler people in education or medicine or law or whatever who are exercising a positive, constructive force in the world in which they live, making their lives count for good.

So, one way or another, most of us do exert some thermostatic control on the world immediately about us and on the people around us. We have to decide whether the

impact of our lives will be an influence for good or bad.

But there is a third decision that you and I have to make that people outside the church don't have to make. There is a third decision that we have to make because we call ourselves Christians. We have to make it because we claim we have given our hearts and lives to the man they crucified that day in Jerusalem. That decision we have to make is this: Will we also influence our world for Jesus? Now, you can influence your environment and those about you for good and that's noble but any humanist does that. The distinctive question that you and I have to face is are we also influencing our world for Jesus Christ? Are we influencing the world for the one to whom we have given our hearts?

The heart of a thermostat that makes it work properly is usually a piece of metal that expands or contracts. This expansion or contraction either makes contact and creates a circuit or breaks it. Without this piece of metal at the heart of the mechanism, the thermostat will not work. Without Jesus Christ in our hearts we cannot affect our surroundings, the people about us, for him. We are simply broken thermostats if that is the case. Let me ask you this morning, do you have Jesus Christ at the center of your life? Is your spiritual thermostat working? I'm not asking do you believe as an intellectual exercise in Jesus Christ. I would assume most of us believe that. But it is one thing to believe in Jesus as an intellectual assent but it is quite another thing to make Him be Lord of our lives, to put him in control of our emotions, to turn over the switch of our will to him and to say, "Lord, here is my life surrendered to you." I am not interested in whether you believe in Jesus intellectually but is He the one who owns your heart? Is He the master of your will? Is He at the control switch of your life? You see Jesus at the center of your life is what makes you work as a Christian. Without that special relationship with Him your spiritual thermostat just won't work. Life without Jesus at the center doesn't work very well. Many of you here this morning know that. You've been through experiences in your life when you saw your life go to pieces in your hands. When you saw your fondest ambitions and dreams turn to dust and just trickle through your fingers. You know that life does not work very well without Jesus.

H. G. Wells, the famous historian and philosopher, said at the age of 61, "I have no peace. All life is at the end of its tether." The poet Byron said, "My days are in the yellow leaf, the flowers and fruits of life are gone, the worm and the canker, and the grief are mine alone." Thoreau, the literary genius, said, "Most men live lives of quiet desperation." Ralph Barton, one of the top cartoonists of the nation, left this note pinned to his pillow before he took his life, "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours a day." That is what life without Jesus in the heart is really like. Don't kid yourself--we see those who have many material things and we think, "Oh, if I had those things I would be so happy." But I want to tell you something. Some of the most unhappy people in the world are those who have an abundance of material things. It really makes life significant to have Jesus at the heart.

Pascal, the French physicist and philosopher, put it this way, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which only God can fill through his Son, Jesus Christ." Dare I suggest this morning that there is a vacuum in your life if Jesus is not at the heart and center of your life? Dare I suggest that if you do not know Jesus as an inner reality there is a vacuum in your life and you are at the end of your tether. Without Him, life does not work very well.

As Christians, we are to be thermostats for Jesus. You know what our world needs?

It needs for us Christians to turn our thermostats up. How the world needs that today! How it needs brave men and women whose hearts are surrendered to him and who are living for him and who are examples to the world of how great life is when Jesus is at the heart of it. But if there is a Jesus-shaped vacuum in your heart this morning and your thermostat is not working, don't go away without Jesus. Don't leave this sanctuary today without making a decision about Him. Life doesn't work well without Him. Don't wait another day. Here is all you do--it's very simple--you say "Lord Jesus, I've been a sinner and my life isn't working very well. I need you at the center today. Forgive me of my sins and I invite Jesus to come in and be the Lord of my life, to control my will and my emotions and Lord, under his influence then let me go out for Him and change my world." If you haven't made that decision, don't put it off. Do it today. Let us together with Him on the throne of our hearts go out in joy and power to change our world for Him.