

Sermon for Sunday, August 24, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"THE PLASTIC SAINT ON THE DASHBOARD"

Acts 15:36-41

Text: "And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other;" --Acts 15:39a

Hardly a day passes that I don't see a saint. He is about five inches tall, he is made of plastic, he has a magnetic bottom, and he is stuck up on someone's dashboard. Now, quite frankly, I have never quite understood the function of the plastic saint. Maybe he is a good luck charm to ward off evil. I know some people who have the St. Christopher figure on their dashboard, but I understand that the Roman Catholic Church has now declared that he is not a true saint. Since he was supposedly the patron saint of travelers, I don't know who has been looking after us since he has been demoted.

And that brings me to another thing about dashboard saints--they are made of plastic. The young people today sometimes call a person "plastic". By that they mean that he is a sort of fake. He is not a real person. He is artificial, insincere--a put-on. If they say a person is plastic it is a serious judgment. He cannot be trusted because he is not what he seems to be.

Well, I suppose most of us have plastic saints of one sort or another on the dashboards of our lives. Some of us have money as our patron saint--some of us have sex--some of us have success--some of us society--some of us have possessions--and all of these saints are plastic. They cannot be trusted. They are artificial and they will fail us. They will let us down. Like St. Christopher, we will discover that they never were saints at all.

I once had a plastic saint on the dashboard of my life. I tried to emulate him. I tried to be what he was. I tried to be the kind of person he was. His name is St. Paul. And St. Paul turned out to be plastic because I thought he was perfect; I thought he was sinless; I thought he was ideal. You understand, of course, that St. Paul himself never made those claims. And you understand, of course, that St. Paul himself wasn't plastic--no, it was my concept of St. Paul that was plastic.

Let me tell you the story of how I found out my saint was plastic. I have been doing a Bible study on the young man in the New Testament named John Mark. In the 12th chapter of Acts, the Bible tells how Herod began to persecute the church and as a result, Peter was put in prison. Because of the dangerous situation, the Christians had a prayer meeting in the home of a woman to pray for Paul. Her name was Mary, and the Bible tells us she was "the mother of John whose other name was Mark." I checked out that reference and discovered that it is very probable that Jesus and his disciples had the Last Supper in this home. Now, it so happened that at the time Peter was in prison, Paul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem. They had come down from the church in Antioch to bring some relief funds to the people being persecuted. When they left Jerusalem to return to Antioch, the Bible tells us that John Mark went with them. Now, there in Antioch the Christians were really praying about what God wanted them to do and the Bible tells us they were worshipping and fasting. The Holy Spirit spoke to them and told them to set apart Barnabas and Paul for missionary work. So, out of that time of seeking God's will, the first missionary enterprise effort was born. As a consequence, the history of the world would be

changed. (Just as an aside, let me say that when people mean business with God and get together to find His will for their lives, God always does history-making things.) In any event, Paul and Barnabas set out on the first missionary journey which is aimed at Asia Minor. Young John Mark, the Bible tells us, goes with them. They stop first at the Isle of Cyprus and then sail for the coast of Asia Minor. When they reach their destination, they find the coastlands to be low and marshy. Mosquitoes breed there and the people of the area suffer from malaria. It is more than John Mark can handle. The Bible says that John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem.

Some time later, after Paul and Barnabas had returned, Paul decided it was time to go back and visit the Christians in the cities they had visited. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them and Paul refuses. As a consequence of this, the Bible tells us there arose a sharp contention between them and the missionary team split up. Barnabas took Mark with him and went to the island of Cyprus. Paul took a man named Silas and went to Asia Minor. On that journey he was to be thrust into the mainland of Europe and thus change the history of western civilization.

Now, the question is this: whatever became of John Mark? Was Paul right about him? Was he a young man unworthy of confidence? Did he not deserve a second chance? Well, the fact is, Paul was dead wrong about John Mark. Barnabas had the perception and the insight and the compassion to see the potential in a young man who had failed. Because of his concern and his nurture of a young man, John Mark was to do some astonishing things. For one thing, he was to write a story of the life of Jesus that would be called "The Gospel of Mark." Two other men, Luke and Matthew, were to use Mark's story as the basis for their own gospels. Without John Mark, our Bible would be quite different from what it is today. At one point, Mark apparently serves as interpreter for Peter when he goes to Rome. Even Paul had to admit his error and he was reconciled with young Mark. Once, when he was in prison and deserted by many of his friends, Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Aristarchus, who is in prison with me, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas." (Col. 4:10) Later on, when he has been temporarily freed, he writes to Timothy, "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he can help me in the work." (II Timothy 4:11)

So, St. Paul could be wrong. He could make mistakes. My concept of St. Paul was plastic. The Paul I imagined didn't even exist. Strangely enough, the fall of my plastic saint brought a sense of relief. I want to share with you some insights I gained that I think are basic and which lie close to the heart of living the Christian life.

First, I discovered I had been trying to mold my life after an impossible ideal that even St. Paul couldn't measure up to. I have always been a compulsive person, driven by the half-conscious fear that I wouldn't do enough. And no matter how hard I tried to do my best, I always ran into someone who did better. If I developed the habit of regular morning prayers and devotions, I would find someone who had them in the evening as well and I ended up wondering if I were devout enough. If I watched my budget and gave 12% of my income to the church, along came someone who gave 15% and I wondered if I were generous enough. If I worked on my day off instead of resting and being with my family, inevitably I'd run into some minister who didn't even take his vacation the year before.

So, I was always experiencing guilt trying to measure up to some impossible ideal of Christian behavior. But when I finally discovered that the saint on the dashboard of my life was plastic, I suddenly knew a freedom I had never had before. St. Paul once wrote to the Philippians, "No, dear brother, I am still not all I should be but I am trying as hard as I can....to reach the end of the race and get the prize to which God is calling us..." (Phil. 3:13,14) Do you understand that? St. Paul is saying that he isn't trying to live up to some ideal. He isn't trying to measure up to some code. No, he was standing before God, trying to be in each moment what God wanted him to be.

Isn't it true that most of us have thought of the Christian life as being some kind of code of conduct, some kind of standard, that everybody ought to live up to? And we say that a Christian doesn't do this or he doesn't do that--and we try to press everyone into the same plastic mold. But the truth is, God calls each of us to freedom--freedom to be what he wants us to be in every situation. For example, look at Paul and Barnabas. Which of them was un-Christian? Was it Paul because he wouldn't take John Mark on the second journey? Or was it Barnabas because he wanted to? Was one of them wrong? Well, actually neither was wrong. Paul couldn't afford to run a risk on John Mark because of what he planned to do. As he stood before God he did what he thought was right. By the same token, Barnabas had a different idea and he reached out to help John Mark. Each was being what he thought God wanted him to be in that situation and in that sense both were right...and in that sense both were free men before God.

So, the first thing I learned is that God doesn't want us worshipping some plastic saint, some ideal of conduct, some impossible standard. No, he wants us both--you and me--to be free men before Him, trying to know His will and to be His people in each situation of life. And what is right for you may be wrong for me, and what is right for me may not be the thing for you.

The second thing I learned was this: because I was measuring not only myself by a plastic saint, I was also measuring others by him too. And in the process, I was ignoring people as persons. I was putting my spiritual yardstick alongside of people to see how they measured up. Are you guilty of that? Do you find yourself classifying people as Protestant or Catholic, Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, black or white, American or foreigner? I think most of us do. When we get people in some such slot what we do is to ignore them as persons--persons of worth, persons God loves, persons for whom Jesus died. For example, young people tend to classify old people as over the hill, and in the process fail to discover some of the most delightful people in the world. Or older people may put all young people with long hair into a certain category and in the process miss some of the most sensitive and loving young people there are.

You see, God doesn't want a Bugle Corps, He wants an orchestra. In a Bugle Corps you have nothing but bugles. Everybody plays the same instrument. But in an orchestra, you have a large variety of instruments and it takes all of them to achieve the tune the director wants. God doesn't necessarily want a long row of plastic saints, all cast from the same mold, all playing the same bugle, all painted to look just alike. No, God wants people to respond to Him, to be whatever instrument He calls them to be, and together we make the music God wants to hear.

Now, apply that to your life. What does God want you to be? What does being a Christian mean? Well, it doesn't mean measuring up to some ideal or goal or standard of conduct. No, it means standing under God from moment to moment, trying to be yourself, trying to be who and what God calls you to be. And it means letting your neighbor be free to do the same thing--letting him be free under God to be God's man or God's woman from moment to moment as God speaks to him.

Keith Miller, in his book A Second Touch, tells of the busy executive in an eastern city who was rushing to catch a train. He had been trying to live a Christian life, but had about given up. He couldn't seem to measure up to the ideals and patterns that most people seemed to think made a Christian. This particular morning en route to Grand Central Station, he promised himself that instead of trying to fit his life into some preconceived goals and ideals and patterns that he would simply try to be a Christian that day. In whatever situation came his way, he would try to respond to God and be God's man in that situation. By the time he had picked up his ticket, he was late. Charging across the lobby with his bag, he started down the ramp to the train just as the conductor called out the last "all aboard." As he was about to board the train, his bag bumped into a small child. The little boy had been carrying a new jigsaw puzzle, the pieces of which were now scattered all over the platform.

The executive paused, saw the child in sudden tears, and with an inward sigh, he stopped, smiled, and began to help the boy pick up his puzzle as the train pulled out of the station. The child watched the man intently. When they finished picking up all of the pieces, the little boy looked at the man with a kind of awe. "Mister," he said hesitantly, "are you Jesus?" And, you know, as the executive tried to be God's man in that moment, in a way he was.

What does being a Christian mean to you? Do you have some plastic saint on the dashboard of your life or are you trying to be God's person moment by moment? This summer in Spearfish, South Dakota, we went to see the Black Hills Passion Play that tells the story of the life of Jesus. When the actor portraying Jesus first appeared in the play, our six-year-old leaned over and whispered to her mother, "Mummy, is that the real Jesus?" It so happens that the man who plays the part of Jesus is an actor who has given his life to producing the passion play. As he responds to God's will for his life, in a sense he is the real thing--he is God's man. What is God's will for your life--right now, this afternoon, tomorrow morning? Will you try to be some plastic saint--or will you try to live each moment so that perhaps someone will say hesitantly, "Mister, are you Jesus?"