

Sermon for Sunday, March 6, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
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"NEW TRICKS AND OLD DOGS"

Acts 3:1-10, 4:22

Text: "For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old." --Acts 4:22

When I was a preacher out in West Texas, our church services were on the radio every Sunday and about half the time we were on television. As a consequence of this, I found myself literally besieged with people from small towns within a 150-mile radius of Lubbock. These people were, for the most part, suffering from serious emotional and spiritual problems and were desperate for help. When I inquired of them why they did not contact their own pastors, the universal reply was, "Because when people see your car at the church in a small town, everybody knows about your problems."

Out there in West Texas one of the men who came to see me was a very prominent man in a nearby town. He was a leader in his community, a successful businessman, and he was a very bright, intelligent person. The day he came into my study his face bore the signs of deep trouble and inner spiritual anguish. "I have driven a long way to talk to you and to ask your help," he began. "May I first ask you a couple of questions? Is it possible for a man to have such a sense of guilt from actually doing bad things that it will have an adverse effect upon him physically and mentally even to the extent that he is no longer able to do his work?" I assured him that this was entirely possible and that I had known numerous instances where this was true. "Then," he said, "my second question is this: can a person gain assurance of God's forgiveness for the wrong he has done--so much so that the burden of guilt is lifted and there comes a healing of the mind and the spirit?" Again I assured him I had frequently seen exactly such healing occur. "Then," he said, "would you be so kind as to kneel with me as I pray?" So there in the study we knelt and he offered one of the most humble and moving prayers I had ever heard. He pled for God's forgiveness as he sorrowfully admitted his failures. I tell you, God is so wonderful! His forgiveness is so complete, so instantaneous! That man arose from his knees with a look of wonder on his face. He was positively radiant. Whoever you are this morning and whatever sin you may have committed, whatever wrong you may have done, there is forgiveness for you. The cross of Jesus is big enough to cover every sin. Praise God for that.

I wish I could tell you that was the end of that man's problems. However, a few weeks later I discovered he had made another appointment through my secretary. When he entered my study the look of radiance was gone. Instead, his face was again marked by trouble and inner anguish of some deep grief. "I have discovered," he said, "that forgiveness is not enough. You see," he went on, "although I know God forgave me for my past sins, I soon discovered that I have not changed. I still have those needs that got me in trouble in the first place. As hard as I have tried I find that I still have not changed. Is there any hope that I can change and be different?"

Well, that is a good question: can I change and be different? Actually, if you ask the question that way, the answer is no. No one can really change himself. As we get older, our personality characteristics, our habit patterns, our life style becomes so hardened that real change becomes impossible. And when we say that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, that is really what we are saying. By the time a person is 35 or 40 it becomes extremely doubtful if any significant changes can occur in his personality structure.

Yes, "can I change...?" Is there any hope or must I always live with these same desperate needs, these same hang-ups, these same terrible problems? Let me say quite frankly to you that I seriously doubt that any of us can really change ourselves in any significant way. Most of us will go to our graves basically as we are this morning. We will continue to be the kinds of persons we are, acting in about the same ways.

One of the reasons we don't change is because the way we are--however inadequate it may be--has a certain security about it and at least we know what to expect from that way of life, both good and bad. It may not be the best security or even a good form of security, but it is a "known" that we can handle. For example, in the gospel of St. John (chapter five) we are told of a man who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus asked him point-blank, "Do you want to be healed?" Do not think that the answer to that question is obvious. While being sick had its disadvantages, it also had its benefits. The man wasn't expected to work or do his share. He probably got special treatment simply because he was not well. To be healed meant giving up a way of life which had some good benefits even if there were bad ones also. So, at first he equivocated with Jesus. He said the reason he was sick was because he didn't have anybody to put him in the pool of water during the time of the year when the angel of God moved upon the water to heal the first person into the water. And incidentally, many of us like to blame our faults--or the fact that our faults aren't cured--on someone else. Now, we do not know all of the conversation between Jesus and this man, but at some point he dared to venture; he dared to run a risk; he dared to give up his security of being an invalid to risk the uncertain future of being well. It was at that point that the Bible tells us that Jesus healed him completely.

So, bad security is better than no security at all. It may be hard for us to accept, but a way of life characterized by some form of disability is hard to give up. It is surrendering the known for the unknown and that may be very threatening and frightening. Thus many people who have serious problems don't want to change because uncertainties are involved. For example, I have known people to be in therapy for five, ten or even more years, simply because they were unwilling to give up their disability for the unknowns of being well. I have seen couples who stay in constant marriage therapy. Each wants the other to change to make the marriage better, but neither is willing to change himself or herself. For one to change might be better; to get a divorce might be happier, but neither is willing to do either. The uncertainties are too great. In the meantime, each is enjoying the luxury of inner satisfaction that he or she is right and each is getting benefits from the counselor's attention.

Another reason we don't change is because the pain of changing may be more intense than the pain of staying as we are. That is a fundamental rule about behavior change. The pain of being as you are must be greater than the pain of changing. I knew a woman once who was a wonderful person. She was intelligent and had many talents. But her home was an absolute disaster area. Her sloppy housekeeping gradually wore away at her relationship to her husband and this caused her great pain. Yet the pain of changing--the pain of bringing order and discipline into her homelife--was greater than the pain of a deteriorating relationship. Finally, when her husband walked out on her a new pain was created. Now she was ready to make some changes in her life, but it was too late.

We see this principle working in the problem of alcoholism. A person drinks basically as a form of escapism--a way of hiding from life. But drinking in itself causes other problems and other pains. Which pain is greater--facing up to life or facing

the consequences of being an alcoholic? How a person answers that question determines whether or not he quits drinking.

But aside from all of these reasons, there is one overwhelming reason we don't change. That reason is that we do not have the inner ability to change. We don't have the inner power, the inner resources, to make the necessary changes. That's what my West Texas friend was saying to me. He found forgiveness for what he had done, but he had not found the power to change his life. "I still have those needs that get me in trouble in the first place" he said. "Is there any hope that I can change and be different?"

"Well, that is a key question for all of us this morning, is it not? Can you teach new tricks to an old dog? Can a person, whose personality characteristics are set and hardened, really be different?"

The New Testament tells us that while we cannot change ourselves, there is one who can change us. This is vividly brought into focus for us in the story of the crippled man at the gate of the temple about whom we read in our scripture for this morning. He is asking for alms--pennies for the poor--when Peter and John pass by. In effect Peter says to him, "I don't have the pennies you are begging for. As a matter of fact, I don't have any money at all. But I do have something that will meet your deepest need. I have something that can change your life. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!" And the Bible says, "...the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old." Yes, new tricks for old dogs.

Would you like to change some things about your life? Would you like to be a different person from what you are? Are you concerned about set ways, fixed habit patterns and personality characteristics that cause you pain and lead you to sin? God has the power to change you. If you want to be changed and are willing to be changed, God can do the job. Let me give you four simple rules to follow in letting God deal with your problems.

Here is rule one: admit your inability to deal meaningfully with changing your life. St. Paul once confessed the same problem. He said, "I do not understand my own action, for I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate." God can't help you until you know you cannot help yourself.

Here is rule two: admit to yourself and to God that you are the way you are. Another way to put it would be to confess your sins. In Alcoholics Anonymous this is a step that cannot be omitted if one wishes to be sober. One must confess, "I am an alcoholic." By the same token, there is no healing for sins in our lives until we confess them. The Bible puts it this way, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John:1:9) In psychology this is called catharsis--cleansing. One reason the Roman Catholic concept of the confessional has remained important is for this very reason. There in confession, the healing process is initiated.

Rule number three: ask God to deal with your specific needs as you understand them. Do you remember the blind man named Bartimaeus who came to Jesus? He cried out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me." But Jesus asked him to be specific about his need. He asked him, "what do you want me to do for you?" Then blind Bartimaeus replied, "Lord, that I might receive my sight." So you must be specific with God--a general plea won't do. For example, it won't do to pray, "Lord, help me to be a better husband." No, you must be specific: "Lord, help me to listen to my wife. Help me to pay attention to the children. Help me to be considerate of the feelings of the family."

It isn't enough to pray, "Lord, make me a better housekeeper." Instead, you must be specific about why you are not keeping a good house. It may be because you are watching "As the World Turns" and every other soap opera; it may be because you talk on the phone too much; it may be because you do not discipline yourself to get started or that you do not order your day. So be specific with God. As best you can as you understand yourself, be honest with the details of your failures.

And here is rule four: having admitted your failure, having confessed and found forgiveness, having been specific about your need, now put that area of your life consciously and deliberately under the direct control of God. Surrender that part of your life totally to God. Sometimes we try to surrender everything to God and as a result, end up surrendering nothing very specific. But if we take the one area of our lives that is causing us the most difficulty and begin putting that under the control of God, he can begin to change us. You try that in your life and see if it won't work for you. Try putting a specific area of your life under God's control and let him deal with that part of you. As God changes that part of your life, then you can let him begin to move into other problem areas that you need to deal with. Don't try to solve all of your problems at once. Take the most pressing only and deal with them first.

Some years ago I had an attractive young wife and mother in my congregation who attempted to commit suicide. It came as a shock to all of us, even her best friends, for she had not confided her desperate problems to anyone. But there in the hospital the walls broke down and she began to pour out her heart. She told of her failure as a wife and mother and her repeated betrayal of the trust her loved ones had placed in her. Her sins and failures were so many that they had overwhelmed her and she sought to escape by taking her life. That day we prayed together and she admitted her sins to God. She experienced the joy and wonder of his marvelous forgiveness. Before she left the hospital she put the most pressing need in her life under the absolute control of God. As the months went by and God began to change her, more and more of her life was put under God's control. Taken all together, her problems had seemed insurmountable, but when she put them one by one under God's control, healing and change began to occur. Not long afterwards she and her family moved to another city. That Christmas a letter came and she wrote, "Back there in those dark days there seemed to be no answer to my problems. One by one God has dealt with them and now I am truly a changed person. It is as though I have been born again." Yes, you can teach an old dog some new tricks and God can change a man even when he is past forty. As the Bible puts it, "For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old."