

Sermon for Sunday, September 24, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"HOW TO TELL IF YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN"

II Corinthians 5:17-21

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

Do you consider yourself to be a religious person? Before you answer that question, let me warn you about some things Jesus said to religious persons. He 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 that 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, do you know, that is pretty strong language to use with religious people!

Once there was a man who lived in the days of Jesus. He was a religious person. Why he even belonged to the high council of the Temple! But 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 and not a fanatic. So he went at night. And to this very religious man, Jesus said, "you must be born again."

I suppose that means that Jesus really isn't interested in whether you are religious or not. No, he isn't interested in whether or not you believe in God, or even if you go to church. What he seems to really want to know is if a person has been born again. Suppose you were Nicodemus and you went to visit Jesus. And suppose he asked you that question, "Are you born again?" What would you say? Would you say you hoped so? Or maybe you would say you thought so, but right at the moment you were suffering from spiritual tired blood.

If there is any question in your mind as to whether or not you have been born again, let me give you three tests that you can give yourself this morning to tell whether or not you could pass the Jesus test. These three tests come from St. Paul. As we read in our scripture for this morning, St. Paul wrote, "if any man is in Christ..." and then he tells us three things happen to him. So let's take our spiritual pulse this morning and see how well we do on the Jesus test.

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 will", you are not married. Now, you may not act much differently towards your new bride, but everything is changed. Now you have a new relationship. So it is with Jesus. 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 will" 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 person who had been born again. A sharp line had been drawn through her life and she had a before and an after. Is there a line like that in your life?

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 Tennison in his poem, "Ulysses", makes his hero say, "I am a part of all that I have met." That is a true insight into human life. Our past does indeed shape and mould who and what we are. In a real sense we are the sum total of our past. Now, that would be fine if our past were all good wholesome and healthy. But if it isn't, how does one escape from his past? If you have stolen, or cheated, or lied, or committed adultery, or been cruel, unkind and thoughtless, how do you escape from that? Our past sins take their emotional pound of flesh. And even when we think we have pushed them out of our minds and forgotten them still there they lie, deep in our unconscious minds, working their dreadful poison in our lives. So 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 to wreck their dreadful emotional damage?

If you go walking along the clean white sand of an ocean beach you can look behind you and see your footprints leading back. No matter how hard you may have tried to walk straight, when you stand and look back you see that your path has been crooked and erratic and a wandering trail. And, I suppose, 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.

When we say "yes" to Jesus, that is what he does to our past. Emotional health, spiritual health, mental health--all begin in forgiveness. So many of us have great chains locked around our waist and attached to that chain are our past sins, our past failures, and all the rest. And we go through life, trying to drag that great chain, loaded with its garbage. But like the relentless tide smoothing out the marks on a sandy beach, the precious blood of Jesus is able to wash out the past and to free us from those dreadful burdens.

So that's test two. How do you feel about your past? Are the effects of your past sins burdening you down, wrecking your life? St. Paul says that when you say "yes" to Jesus, the old has passed away. I remember reading a story once that illustrates this beautifully. It seems a young boy had gotten into serious trouble that brought shame both to him and to his parents. Unable to face up to the shame, 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 you can find it in your hearts to forgive me," he wrote, "and are willing for me to come home again, please hang a sheet on the clothes line." When the fateful day came, and when the train drew near the place, he could not bear to look. He could not believe his parents could ever find it in their hearts to forgive him for the shame and sorrow he had brought upon them. 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!" Oh, how much more does God forgive us! How much more abundant is his forgiveness! 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 tomorrow, and next week and next year?

and all the years to come? Gert Bahannah, whom I mentioned earlier, tells us that before she found Jesus she had no way to face the future which seemed so bleak and empty. She had to have a drink to start the day, a drink from hour to hour to keep her going, and finally a drink to help her go to sleep at night. Life does not work very well without a future. We have a lot of poor people in America and do you know what the most deadening thing, the most awful thing, about being poor and poverty-stricken? It is its hopelessness. There is no hope for the future. And life without hope is life that is hardly worth living.

What about your future? What is your hope? Will you go to heaven to be with Jesus when you leave this earthly life? The Bible tells us that when we give our hearts to Jesus we pass from death into life. Or, as St. Paul puts it, "behold, the new has come." When you come to the end and you stand in the presence of God, what will be important then? Will your business success be important then? Will the make of your car or the size of your car or the size of your bankroll, or the list of your clubs matter to you then? No, the only thing that will matter then is what will your future in eternity be like? And only if you have Jesus will you have passed from death into life; only with him will all things be new.

Well, there are the three tests, the three ways to tell if you are a Christian and if you have been born again. Are you a new creation with a before and an after? If your past wiped away, forgiven? Have you passed from death to life so that you know you will go to heaven? How did you score? Did you have a passing score? Well, maybe you are a Jesus drop-out. Maybe you do have spiritually tired blood after all. Is there any hope for you? Yes, there is hope for each one of us here this morning if he will make a start. If you are not sure you passed the test, if there is any doubt in your mind about where you stand with the Lord, you can begin by passing test number 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 about Jesus.

Once, when the Romans were fighting the last of the Greek kingdoms established by Alexander the Great, the Roman general met with Antiochus, the Seleucid 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 me an answer before you step out of that circle or your answer is war." You see, sometimes not to decide is to say, "no." Where you sit this morning, Jesus draws a circle of love around you. He says, "Now is the day of salvation. Decide before you step out of this circle or your answer may forever be, 'no'".

Will you say "yes" to Jesus?