

Sermon for Sunday, January 27, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"WHEN GOD STOPS CALLING"

St. John 12:44-50

Text: "He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge, the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day."

St. John 12:48

The Gospel of St. John is different from the other three gospels. It was the last of the four gospels to be written and it tends to be rather reflective. It has many long discourses by Jesus. It tends to be rather philosophical in style. For that reason, the passage that we read for our scripture this morning is rather unusual. It is made up of a series of statements by Jesus that are assertions which have a sense of urgency about them.

Now, as you catch this sense of urgency in the words of Jesus; as you realize the sudden change of style from that which St. John ordinarily uses, you can't help but wonder why. Well, if you will look at the next verses that follow the passage we are considering you will suddenly discover why. There we read, "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father..." There it is. He is rapidly approaching the end of his earthly ministry. His career is about to reach its climax. The time he has left to communicate with men is fast drawing to a close. In that context we can understand his sense of urgency. He does not have much time left and he wants to make it unmistakably clear who he is and what it is all about.

Let me put what he says in a sort of modern context. First, Jesus says, "He who believes in me, believes not in me but in him who has sent me." He says, "He who sees me sees him who sent me." He says, "I have come as light into the world." He says, "whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." He is saying, "I am God's message to you...I am God's telegram to you...I am God's phone call to you for he who sees me sees him who sent me." As a matter of fact, it is with that concept that the Gospel of John begins. It begins by saying that Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is the word that comes into the world. Jesus is God's phone call to the world to give men his word.

But Jesus says a second thing in our scripture this morning. He says that for the man who doesn't respond to him; for the man who fails to answer the phone, the phone is about to stop ringing. Listen to what he says, "If anyone hears my sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. That is, to put it in modern idiom, "If you don't listen to me, that's not my fault for you judge yourself." Or to put it another way, "If God calls and you don't answer the phone, that's your fault."

What would our world be like without the telephone? All of us have become so dependent upon this instrument that without it the whole business world would grind to a halt until adjustments could be made. How would the young ladies feel if their phones never rang? How does a business man feel when his phone doesn't ring? I was visiting a friend recently who has retired. He still maintains an office, but he is no longer the key figure any more. As we chatted he looked at his phone and said, "I used to hate that phone because I was so busy and it kept interrupting me. Now I find that I still hate it because it never rings." I remember reading in the paper the story of a woman who was elderly who became ill. For a week she had been confined to her bed and never once did her phone ring. It was so distressing that when she got well she founded an organization that lonely people or old people could hire to simply call them twice a day just to talk and to be sure that everything was okay. Yes, it is a terrible thing when the phone stops ringing.

Sometimes the phone stops ringing because we won't answer it. At our house I have gotten to the place that I will hardly answer the phone any more. It is always for the kids these days! Several summers ago I came back from vacation early because I had to get the kids off to various summer camps and church conferences. Ordinarily I don't like to be in town during vacation because if people know I'm there and they have needs, they will call. But that week I stayed home and when the phone rang, I just didn't answer. After a while the phone stopped ringing. That's the way it is. If you don't answer, after a while it will stop ringing.

Jesus is God's phone call to you. He is God's message to the world. He is God's word of what God is like, the message of how to live in God's light, the message of how to keep from being judged. But if we don't respond, if we don't answer, after a while the phone stops ringing for us.

Let me ask you some questions. How many times a day are you aware of the will of God for you in something that you are planning or something that you are doing? How many times a day when you make decisions are you aware that you may not be doing God's will? How many times a day are you conscious of the fact that God is somehow trying to communicate with you or to make himself and his will known to you? How many times each day are you aware of the presence of God in your life? If you could answer these questions multiple choice, would you check, "A great deal"; "Some of the time"; or perhaps, "Hardly at all"? Are you in communication with God or has your spiritual phone quit ringing? If it has quit ringing, it isn't because God doesn't call or that God never dialed your number.

You know, over in the first chapter of Romans, St. Paul talks about the wickedness of some of the people in the world. He lists some of the evil things they do. And then he concludes with this dreadful passage, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts..." Yes, God gave them up. You see, God called and called--their spiritual phones rang and rang--but when nobody answered, God hung up. As St. Paul said, "God gave them up."

This happens to everyone who does not respond to God. It can happen to you. Think back in your life and you can remember times when you felt especially close to God, when you were really aware of his presence, or the time you felt his presence in a special way when you were making some decision. But more and more you began to put God off. You said, "Not now, Lord, some other time." Or you thought to yourself, "There is plenty of time for God later on. Right now I want to do what I want to do; I want to do what is best for me right now; I want to do what everybody else is doing; I want to do what is popular." So you put God off. You didn't respond to God. You let the phone ring.

Perhaps this morning, as you think about it, you may be suddenly aware that you are no longer sensitive to God's will for your life; you no longer are conscious of his presence so much. Perhaps this morning, as you think about it, you may be realizing that your spiritual phone has quite ringing...or doesn't ring very often.. and not very loud. Is that the case with you today?

I know a business man who was once very active in the church. He was a Sunday School teacher, and a Deacon. He was concerned that his family come under the influence of the Church. But the chance came to make a certain business deal. It was a very questionable enterprise, a deal barely within the limits of the law. He felt it was not right, he struggled with his conscience, he talked to me about it. Eventually he went ahead with it. It meant financial success and security so he did it. Today he is no longer in the church--his children have all had serious emotional problems--he and his wife are estranged. God called and called but he wouldn't answer and now his spiritual phone has quit ringing. He thought he would gain so much--actually he lost everything.

I suspect many of us are doing things this morning we know we ought not to be doing; I suspect lots of us are engaged in things that hurt our conscience because God keeps telling us we are wrong. If we keep doing those things the day will come when our spiritual phone will quit ringing--God will give us up. And some of us are not doing things we know God is calling us to do--we know God wants certain things of us, calls us to do certain things, but we are putting God off, we are waiting for a more opportune time or we are simply unwilling to make the sacrifice right now. But one of these days the phone will stop ringing.

Let me share with you a story told by Dr. W.A. Criswell in his book, "The Gospel According to Moses." Dr. Criswell is pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas--probably the largest church in the world. The event he tells happened when he was a boy. An evangelist came to the small Texas town in which he lived to conduct a series of meetings. In one of the weekday morning meetings the evangelist issued a challenge to those who were present. He asked those who would respond to God's call to serve him in full time Christian service to step forward and meet him at the front of the church to take his hand as an indication that they were yielding their lives to the service of God. Dr. Criswell, then a boy of 11 or 12 years of age, was convinced in his heart that God had called him to preach, so he stepped forward. But an elder man came that morning also, the elder brother of the evangelist. The two men met at the front of the church and with tears flowing they embraced. The elder man said, "Years ago, in the early days of my life, I heard God's call to preach the gospel and I turned it down. I've been fighting this call all through the years, but today I have made my decision--I'm responding to the call. I'm going to serve God in the preaching of the gospel." Nobody noticed the small boy who had come forward that morning. He was destined to become a famous preacher and the pastor of the largest church in the world. All eyes were upon the older man. Everyone was thrilled and said, "How wonderful that after all those years he should at last respond to God's call and obey." It was announced that he would preach his first sermon on the following Sunday. When the day arrived, the small boy came early in order to get a front seat to hear the first sermon of the older man.

The man stood behind the pulpit, he opened the Bible. He was a man past the middle years of life, he had been a farmer and all those years he had followed the plow down the long furrows. His face was suntanned and his hands were hardened from toil and labor. He had little education and no formal training for the ministry. He tried to preach. His words were slow and halting and he stumbled as he read. He could not put his thoughts into words. It was sad and pathetic. Everybody there knew that God had not called him now. Even the small boy sitting on the front pew could understand the tragedy of it all. For the older man, it was his first and last sermon. It seemed that God was saying to him that day, "I forgive you for the disobedience of the past, but the day of your opportunity is gone."

Do you see? When God speaks and calls to some form of service, to some path of obedience, to some commitment of life, we need to listen and obey. It may not be what we want or what we desire, but if we do not respond God's call may not come again. It may be that the spiritual phone in our hearts will stop ringing and the day of our opportunity will forever pass.

Is God speaking to you in some way this morning? Is he asking you to give up some sin, some evil, you are doing? Is God calling you this morning to some pathway of obedience, to some task, to some responsibility? If so, I urge you this morning to answer in obedience right now. It may be that the day of your opportunity will soon be gone, that the phone will stop ringing.

Some day each one of us will stand before God to be judged by him. How shall we be judged on that day? Jesus says, "He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day." Yes, that will be our judge--the word he spoke and we didn't hear, the phone that rang and we didn't answer.