

Sermon for Sunday, February 3, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, DD, Pastor
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"PULLING THE TRAIN WITH THE CABOOSE"

Romans 3:21-31

Text: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."
Romans 3:23-24

It has been of growing concern to me over the years that so many people who are Christians seem unable to live a triumphant, victorious Christian life. Perhaps you are one of those who feel that there ought to be more to the life of a Christian than you are now experiencing. Perhaps you are one of those who is waiting for something to get you moving--waiting for something to happen in your life to motivate you--planning somewhere, sometime down the line to start being something you are not this morning, yet which in your heart you really want to be.

Part of our problem may be that we are trying to pull the train with the caboose. Imagine with me an old timey train. First is the steam locomotive, second is the coal car, next come the freight cars, and last comes the caboose. Will that train run without the caboose? Of course it will. Will it run without the freight cars? Of course it will. But it cannot run without the locomotive and the coal car. To be a complete train it needs all four, but it will run with just the engine and the fuel car. Let's call our imaginary train the "Salvation Special."

The locomotive of the "Salvation Special" is what the New Testament calls the kerygma or the basic story about Jesus. I'm going to call that the Jesus factor. You see, the world was sinful and cut off from God. The world was lost--but something was injected into that whole situation that changed everything--and it was the Jesus factor. Some people try to make their good works the engine to their Salvation Special. They seem to have the idea that if they do certain things, or don't do other things, that this will pull them right into heaven's station. But St. Paul knocked that idea into a cocked hat in our scripture this morning. We read there how St. Paul talked about salvation and he asked the question if we are saved by the principle of work. And to his own question he gives a resounding "no". (verse 27)

Now, good works are an important part of the Christian's life, but they are not first. They are not the engine. Good works are the freight cars. Freight cars don't pull that train. On the other hand, however, if you don't have some freight cars you don't have much of a train and I'm certainly not saying a Christian's Salvation Special ought not to have a long string of freight cars. I'm just saying that you can't pull the train with freight cars. No, the engine to our spiritual train is the Jesus factor.

But a locomotive, no matter how big or powerful or beautiful won't run without a coal car. To make the engine work, it has got to have some fuel. Our scripture for this morning tells us quite plainly what the coal car on the Salvation Special is--it is faith. Therefore, St. Paul wrote in the words we read this morning of the "righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." (verse 22) Now, the New Testament tells us certain things that we call the Jesus factor. Now what is the Jesus factor? The Bible says that Jesus was the Son of God, that he died on the cross for the sins of the world, and that God raised him from the dead to show us that death and separation from God have been overcome. Now, that is the Jesus factor--the simple facts about Jesus. That's the engine to the Salvation Special. The question is, do you believe that? I do not mean do you believe it intellectually, but I mean do you believe it to the extent that it becomes the center, the focus of your life? I mean do you believe it to the extent that it governs and rules and controls your whole life?

Let me put it another way. Because of those facts about what God in Jesus did, have you invited Jesus to be the engineer to run your locomotive. Have you surrendered your heart to the complete and total lordship of Jesus? If you believe the facts about Jesus in that way, that is what the Bible calls faith. Facts alone are useless. If the facts are the engine, then faith is the coal car, the fuel, that makes the engine run.

As we are putting our Salvation Special together, we see that the locomotive is the facts about Jesus, about what God has done. Faith is the coal car and the good works we do because Jesus is in our hearts are the freight cars. Now let's talk about the caboose. Many people, when they hear about Jesus and when they know what God has done for them, respond in faith and accept Jesus as their Saviour. And many times when people do that they have a great, wonderful Christian experience. St. Paul on the road to Damascus is a good example. When he was walking along the road he was probably thinking about everything that had happened back there in Jerusalem and what all those Christians were saying about Jesus. And as he walked along he found himself accepting the fact that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, and that his death on the cross was for him. So walking along to Damascus St. Paul found himself thinking about the Jesus factor and his heart responded in faith. When he did that he had a great conversion experience in which Jesus appeared to him. And St. Paul never forgot it. As a matter of fact, in the book of Acts it is recorded several times that Paul shared his Christian experience with others. Again, in I Corinthians he writes, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (I Corinthians 15:8) But the point I want to make unmistakably clear is that Paul's experience didn't save him. The thing that saved him was what God in Christ had done for him on the cross when his sins were washed away; the thing that made it real was his response of faith. His experience, his vision of Jesus, wasn't the engine or even the coal car, it was the caboose.

Let's look at another example, this time from the tenth chapter of Acts. St. Peter went to Caesarea to the home of a man named Cornelius. Incidentally, Cornelius is the first Gentile to become a Christian and the story I am about to tell you is sometimes called the "Gentile Pentecost." When Peter got to the house of Cornelius, he preached a sermon. I'm going to read you that sermon from the Bible and as I do, notice that it is just the Jesus factor. Here is what the Bible said. Peter preached, "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who are chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." And then Peter ends his sermon by saying, "To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes (that is, has faith) in him received forgiveness of sins through his name." Now Peter simply preached the Jesus factor and that is the engine to the Salvation Special. But as Peter preached the Bible tells us that Cornelius and his household responded in faith to Jesus. They believed and they took Jesus right into their hearts. When that happened they had a tremendous Christian experience. The Bible says the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word and they began to praise God. However, the thing that saved them was not that experience. The thing that saved them was their faith in Jesus. The experience was just the caboose.

I began this sermon by saying that it has been a growing concern that so many people seem unable to live a triumphant, victorious Christian life. Dare I suggest that it is because they are trying to pull the train with the caboose? There are two ways in which people try to pull their train this way. See how it works with way number one. Some people who have had a great emotional experience when they

accept Jesus by faith like Paul did or like Cornelius did, often give the impression that if you don't have a caboose like their's, your train won't run! It is important that people give their Christian testimony, but if the emphasis is put on the experience rather than on Jesus and faith in him, there is the danger of giving the impression that the caboose pulls the train. But the fact is we are not saved by an experience. We are saved by having faith in Jesus. A christian experience is just a bonus, a fringe benefit, the caboose.

But look what happens when you are trying to pull your Salvation Special with a caboose. You see the caboose is an experience--it is what you feel. There comes a day when your depressed or when things go wrong. There comes a time when what you feel is all negative and bad. There comes a moment when all you feel is fear or hurt or anxiety. If you are pulling your train by what you feel then suddenly your train isn't moving any more. But a Christian keeps on going on faith, not feeling. His faith is in Jesus and promises of God and not in what he feels. Sometimes I don't feel well, but by faith I trust what God has said in Jesus Christ and I follow him because I trusted. Look at Job in the Old Testament. Everything bad happened to him and he certainly wasn't feeling very well. But Job who lived on faith could cry out in the face of the worst that life could do to him, "I know that my Redeemer liveth." That's faith and not feeling.

So if many people are unable to live a triumphant, victorious Christian life it is because they are living by what they feel and what they feel is not always good. Are you guilty of that? I know I am sometimes guilty of it. But there is a second way in which Christians fail to live a victorious life. See how way number two works. These are people whose train is sitting on the siding because they don't have a caboose at all. They have heard others tell about their Christian experience and since they have never had any great thing happen to them, they are waiting on a caboose. They are waiting on heaven knows what--lightening from heaven? A vision of angels? A voice out of the blue? And because they are waiting on a caboose--an experience--they can't get their train moving.

Jesus had that same problem with some of the Jews. The Bible says, "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.'" That is, "Give us a religious experience, an emotional thrill, and we'll run our train on your track." Jesus wouldn't do that. He knew better. He knew you couldn't pull a train with the caboose and he replied to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it..."(Matt. 12:38,39) Yes, many of us are waiting to be motivated by an experience and in the meantime our train stands idle on the siding. Is that where you are today?

The little Mississippi town in which I was raised was built on either side of the railroad. When a train came through town it was really a community experience! Looking back, I suppose the town wouldn't have been there at all if it hadn't been for the railroad. Anyway, many times I remember watching trains go by that for some strange reason had two or more cabooses. People who try to pull their spiritual train with the caboose and end up needing more cabooses, more and more experiences because their Christian life is based on feeling, it's experience centered instead of being Jesus Centered. Sadly enough, such persons may have a lot of experiences but very little of Jesus in their hearts and in their lives. And let me make it clear that I am not against Christian experiences. I think they are great and wonderful and I've had a few pretty tremendous ones myself. I'm just saying that you don't pull the Salvation Special with the caboose.

This morning I have been talking about how to live a triumphant and victorious Christian life. Many of us are trying to live a Christian life by what we have felt and it won't work. Others of us are waiting on some experience to motivate us to live the Christian life and that won't work either. You just don't pull the train with the caboose. How do you live a triumphant, radiant, victorious Christian life? We try to make it complex but it is quite simple. You invite Jesus to be your engineer and take over the Lordship of your life, by faith you trust God's word that he will accept your invitation, and then as you step out in faith to live for Jesus, you will discover that in that very act of faith, power is being released in your life. I dare you to take God at his word this morning, to step out in faith to get your Salvation Special moving. I hope you have many freight cars, a long string of them and if you're lucky you might have a caboose, but you don't need it to run the train.