

Sermon for Sunday, March 23, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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Continued

"GOD'S PEOPLE RECYCLING PLANT"

Jeremiah 18:1-12

Text: "And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand,  
and he worked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter  
to do." Jeremiah 18:4

These days everyone is concerned about the environment and ecology. A great hub-bub is being created nationally over the radiation spills at Three Mile Island. Everybody is wondering what we are going to do with the waste. We hear a lot about "pollution levels" and with summer coming, we are going to hear about "thermal inversions" and "environmental systems". Even the television commercials have gotten in on the act and one of the best and funniest TV commercials is one dealing with beer cans. In this particular commercial, the beer company offers to buy back its empty cans and the commercial shows a little old ladies group processing the cans for return. One lady puts a can under her rocker and smashes it as she rocks. Another uses a waffle iron to process her cans. But the gem of the commercial is the white-haired lady who looks like someone's sweet little old grandmother who is using a karate chop to smash her cans as she shouts, "Hah!" So, re-processing and recycling has become an important part of our ecology today.

But as I have watched that particular commercial--and others dealing with the same subject--I have become aware that the greatest waste product of human society today is people--human personalities. The greatest junk-heap, the greatest garbage pile today and the one that most threatens society is the mass of broken personalities. And broken personalities are responsible for broken laws, broken morales, broken marriage broken relationships, broken lives. And while we surely need to be concerned for the ecology of our environment, most of all we need to be concerned about the ecology of human beings.

With that thought in mind, I would like for us to think together this morning about recycling people. Most of us are guilty at one time or another of trying to recycle someone else. When Sydney and I got married I had in mind an ideal vision of what kind of wife she ought to be and I started trying to recycle her. I found out that wasn't very wise. It wasn't even very safe. As it turned out, she was better than the image I had in my mind.

When I marry young couples, I usually give them certain tests. Over the years, I have come to expect certain things and if I don't find them in the test results, I begin to try to find out why. For example, I expect a girl to select a husband who has many of the characteristics of her father. If the testing, however, indicates that her fiance has few of her father's characteristics, I immediately know one of two things. First, either she has a poor relationship to her father and has deliberately chosen someone different from him or, second, while her fiance does not have her father's characteristics, she intends to recycle him as soon as they are married.

Now, anybody getting married who intends to recycle the partner is headed for heartache for both of them. In the first place, if a girl is trying to recycle her husband, he is going to resist recycling and resent her efforts. He is going to be hurt that she doesn't accept him for who and what he is as a unique personality, and instead is trying to make him over into some image that she has in her head. In the second place, no matter how perfect her father might have been in her eyes, he is still an imperfect model and even if she succeeds in recycling her husband in his image, she will not be very pleased with the results.

A home-made husband, created by an amateur wife is a glaring example of unskilled labor. And third, in trying to recycle him after some other model, she is so intent on making him into what he is not that she cannot appreciate him for what he really is. She fails to appreciate his uniqueness, his particular gifts and talents that he--in his own right--bring to the marriage. In the light of this, the first observation I want to make is that only God can recycle anyone. I can't recycle you and you can't recycle me. I can't even recycle myself. I tried it --I keep turning over new leaves trying to recycle me--I have got enough leaves to start a bonfire. Only God can recycle a person

The second observation I want to make is this: in recycling us, God is limited by what he has to work with. Had you ever stopped to think of that? God is limited in what he can do in your life. He can do in your life only what you will permit him to do, only as much as you are willing to let him do. He will never take your freedom away from you and therefore he imposes on himself a limitation. God can only work with the raw material that you put at his disposal.

In our text for this morning we read, "And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he worked it into another vessel as it seemed good to the potter to do." Notice carefully the sequence of words. It was not the potter's hands that did the spoiling. It wasn't the ability of the potter that was in question here. It was not the artistry of the potter that failed. No, the text says that it was the clay that was spoiled. The fault lay with the clay itself.

The potter may have started out to make a beautiful, exquisite vessel that would take the breath away with its workmanship. But even as his hand began to shape and mold the clay, his sensitive, trained fingers tell him the quality of the clay is not right for the kind of beautiful object that he had in mind. Now he is limited by what he has to work with. So, his hands began to shape the clay into some other vessel of less value, less beauty, less usefulness. He is limited by the raw material at his disposal.

How much of you--how much of your life--are you really willing to put at God's disposal? That's the real question, isn't it? God is limited in your life and mine by how much of ourselves we are willing to give him to work with. The less we give him, the less he can do. The more we give him, the more he can shape us into who and what he always wanted us to be. Each of us must ask in his own heart, "How much of myself am I giving God? How much of myself am I really willing to put at God's disposal to let him shape and mold as he wills?" Now I would like to ask you that question this morning. How much of you does God have--how much of your life have you put at God's disposal to recycle you in the image of Jesus?

So, our first observation is that only God can recycle a person. You can't recycle anybody else--you can't recycle yourself. The second observation is that God can recycle only what we put at his disposal. The third observation is this: there is one way in which you and I can help one another in the recycling process. We can help by providing the atmosphere in which recycling can occur. There are ways by which we can help one another become more pliable in God's hands. Let me share with you what some of these things are.

First, we can help one another by accepting one another as we are. Most of us want to accept one another provided we meet certain specifications or provided we measure up to certain standards. A husband says, "Well, if my wife would do such and such or act a certain way, I would respond and we could have a better marriage."

A wife says, "Well, if he would talk to me when he comes home, play with the children on Saturdays, and carry out the garbage every day I wouldn't nag him so." But let me ask you this question: do you want God's love for you to be conditional? Do you want God's love for you to be determined by how you act, by who and what you are? Well, I don't! I know far too well, I can never earn or deserve God's love. I don't want God to love me provided I become some perfect person. I can't do that and I don't want his love for me conditioned. Thank God he doesn't do that! He accepts me just as I am. You remember the hymn, "Just As I Am Without One Plea Except Thy Blood Was Shed for Me". But, God expects us to love others in the same way. Do you remember how the Bible puts it? "This I command you that ye love one another even as I have loved you."

But second, not only must we love one another as we are, we must do so without expecting a response. Recently I was talking with a young lady about her marriage problems. She said, "I have done all the things he wants me to do, but he never changes. He never makes any response." Well, that sort of love just won't work. It is a conditioned love. It is a love that is trying to manipulate the other person. In effect she was saying, "I will love him in certain ways provided, he makes some changes, provided my love has some impact on his life so that he becomes different." Is that a love that offers freedom to another? Is that an unconditioned love? Well, you know very well it is not. And that kind of love which is trying to manipulate someone else will always fail.

So, we can help one another in the recycling process by first accepting one another as we are and second by doing so without expectation of change in the other. If you parents would start accepting your children for themselves and not what you are trying to make them become, your relationship would be better. And you children, if you would start accepting your parents for who and what they are, you would get along better. You husbands and you wives, if you started accepting each other with love, not conditioned on what the other does, your going to have a better marriage. So we can help one another by accepting without expectation. Now third, we must see one another as persons and not problems. When you start to pray for your husband or your wife or your child or a friend, how do you pray? Do you pray, "Lord, please help my wife to stop nagging me?" Do you pray, "Lord, make my husband talk to me when he comes home?" Do you pray, "Lord, make my child get better grades, have him get his hair cut, and while you are at it, Lord, improve his table manners?" Do you pray, "Lord, my best friend has this terrible habit that just irritates me. When we begin to pray that way, we are praying not for people but for problems. Were seeing them as problems and not persons. When we begin to thank God for the other person--for the good qualities, for the best things about them--we are seeing them as persons and not problems. When that happens, it may not change the other person but it certainly changes our inner attitudes toward them. When that inner attitude changes, we are helping to provide an atmosphere in which the other than has the potential to change. You see, when we see others through the eyes of love as persons, they do begin to change. They respond in almost direct proportion to the amount of love we have for them as persons

Bruce Larson, in his book Dare To Live Now, tells how this worked in his own family. He had a first grade child who still sucked his thumb. Bruce writes, "I was frantic and tried everything I knew to break him of the habit including scoldings, prayer with him, prayer for him, and the vile-tasting things that are concocted to put on children's thumbs to deter them from this persistent habit. But he was unable to stop." Mr. Larson goes on to add, "But one day I realized what my true motives were. I was really embarrassed to have my child advertising to the world the emotional needs of his own home and the inadequacy of his parents.



I saw that my love for this child was conditioned by my need for him to stop this habit." He concludes by saying, "I stopped correcting, nagging, or even referring to the thumb-sucking in any way. God had set me free and I secretly called my son by a new name, 'Mr. Wonderful!' I didn't care if he ever stopped sucking his thumb. The miracle is that in ten days he stopped cold and hasn't sucked his thumb since."

No, you and I can't recycle one another. Remaking a man is the business of God. God is the potter who can shape and remold as much of us as we will give to him. But we can serve one another by a love that accepts one another where we are, by doing so without demanding change, by seeing one another as persons and not problems. And in that context of love a miracle begins to happen. In that context we provide the atmosphere in which another is free to change, free to become a new person, free to let God loose in his life, free to let the clay of human personality be recycled by the potter. Only this question remains than for you, "How much of you have you put at God's disposal?" You see, that is all he has to work with -- what you give him.