

Sermon for Sunday, September 21, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"NO CHEAP ANSWERS"

St. John 16:1-7

Text: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." St. John 16:7

My son Peter and I are enrolled at Meramec Community College in ground school for instrument pilots. One of the books we had to buy for the course is published by the Department of Transportation and it contains 1013 possible questions one might be asked on the instrument rating examination. Now, one of the nice things about that book is that in the back it has an answer sheet. If we could remember the answers to a thousand and more questions, we were in business! Unfortunately for us, we made a dismaying discovery. The professor of the course had gone to the bookstore and taken out all of the answer sheets. For us, there will be no cheap answers.

I was never very good in arithmetic in grade school. High school math was an absolute nightmare. I have always been deeply grateful that I came along before the new math did. My children have always done well in math and one of the reasons is that I made it a firm rule never--under any circumstances--to help them with their homework. But back when I was in high school I made a wonderful discovery. My high school math book had the answers in the back of the book. If I didn't want to go to the trouble of working the problem--or if I didn't know how to work it--I could always get the answer out of the back of the book. I didn't have to go through the discipline, the effort, the struggle, of working the problem for myself. There was only one big drawback to having the answers in the back of the book: I never learned any math.

There are a lot of us today who are still looking for some cheap answers in the back of the book. We come to some trouble, some disaster, some problem, some hard place in life and we want some quick, easy solution. We don't want life to be hard or difficult and we look for a painless way out.

For example, because of the pressures of life, because of emotional needs that he may have, a man may begin to run around on his wife. He is looking for a cheap way to meet his needs. To be honest with his wife about his real needs, to share with her his hurts and insecurities, is too difficult. He is afraid to expose himself as the real person he is. He is unwilling to pay the price of hard work to make his relationship to his wife more meaningful to both of them and instead goes for the cheap answer. Or again, a wife may bring some pretty deep needs into her marriage relationship. Instead of working to understand her needs, of trying to discover who she is as a human being, she begins to blame and berate her husband because he doesn't meet her needs. It is much easier to blame someone else for our feelings and emotions than it is to do the hard work of dealing with ourselves. She is looking for the cheap answer and there really is none.

Most of us--at one time or another--try to use God this way. Maybe we are terribly unhappy and we pray for God to make us happy. Maybe we want something desperate and we pray for God to give it to us. Maybe we come to some hard place in life--somedesperate illness, some terrible loneliness, some crisis in a relationship--and we want some fast, cheap answer from the back of the book.

Bill Cosby, the comedian, has a very funny skit about Noah and the ark. Noah has been having a very hard time. In the first place he has had to work extremely hard, long hours to build the ark. Second, his neighbors are laughing at him for having this huge boat in his driveway. Third, when he begins to collect all of the animals, they laugh at him and call him Tarzan. So when Noah is herding the last of the animals into the ark and is pushing two big, fat hippos up the gangplank, he is ticked off with God. Suddenly, God speaks and tells Noah that he has two male hippos and he'll have to take one of them back and get a female hippo. Noah has reached the end of his patience and gets angry with God. He tells God how hard he has been working and he is through with the whole business. If God wants a female hippo, he'll just have to change one of the males. God answers, "You know I don't work that way." But Noah insists he isn't about to get another and suddenly it begins to rain! His rebellion evaporates rather quickly and he says, "You and me, God. Right?" Now, that is a very funny skit, but Bill Cosby has his theology right. God doesn't work that way. He is no cheap answer in the back of the book. He doesn't wave a magic wand to change big, fat hippos or to remove all of our problems and difficulties. Life's book has no cheap answers in the back.

"Well," you might ask, "if God isn't giving me any answers from the back of the book, why should I bother with God?" I would like to suggest two things to you this morning that God offers to do for you. They are not cheap answers to life's problems, but they are the only two things that will work in the long run.

First, God offers you costly forgiveness. Sin for you and me is not so much the various things we do that are bad. I wish sin were that simple. But the basic thing you and I are guilty of is alienation from God. We are people who are centered on self, who put self at the center of life and turn our backs on God. And all of the breakdowns in human life, in human relationships, in human society are because of life focused on self. To forgive that is costly for God to do. You and I don't know much about the cost of forgiveness. I know of a young man whose wife betrayed him. He has forgiven her and accepted her back, but the cost is deep. His self-image is shattered because she loved someone other than him, his trust is broken and he fights suspicion, his heart is bleeding because his love was despised and walked on. Now, when he puts his arms around his wife and says, "I love you," he knows the cost of forgiveness.

In a far more profound sense our forgiveness was costly to God. Back in the Old Testament, the Hebrew had to offer sacrifices for his sin and he quickly learned the cost of forgiveness. When he had to offer sacrifice to God, he could hardly afford to give up one of his best animals. As he gathered his family about him and as he slew the animal, he was acting out in a very dramatic and very real way the cost of sin. When the knife was put to the throat of the animal, when the red blood flowed in vivid reality, when the animal lay at last with its body convulsing in the final throes of death, one simply could not miss the visible cost of sin where there is no cheap answer in the back of the book. So, for a nomadic, flock-tending people who were dependent on their animals for clothing, for milk, butter, cheese, and meat, the loss of a fine animal was costly. One was not likely soon to forget the picture of that dying animal that was so important to their livelihood.

You and I might understand the cost of forgiveness today if once a year we had to take our finest automobile and sacrifice it. Can you picture yourself smashing the windshield, puncturing the tires, ripping the upholstery, and then setting the whole thing on fire? If we had to do that, we would understand a little more clearly the consequence of sin and the high cost of forgiveness. Can you imagine the agony of a teen-age boy with a date that night watching his father sacrifice the family car? But I'll tell you this: time would never erase from his memory the vividly real picture of the cost of forgiveness acted out before his eyes.

Well, your forgiveness and mine has cost God far more than a sheep or a car. It cost him his own Son. It was his own Son who took our place and died our death and bore the awful consequences of our sin. And God offers you forgiveness--costly forgiveness. It is yours to have as a free gift.

The second thing God offers you is expressed in our text for this morning. Jesus said, "If I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." So, we are not only offered forgiveness for who and what we are, but we are offered God's Spirit to help us be God's man or God's woman. Well, that's what I need--don't you? I simply cannot be God's person on my own. No matter how hard I try, like St. Paul I discover that I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. (Romans 7:18-19) Isn't that true in your life, too? So God gives us just what we need--he gives us help to live for him.

Now, there are a lot of us here this morning who have somethings going on in our lives that we know are wrong. Some of us are involved in things that are legally wrong; some of us are doing things morally wrong; some of us are treating other persons in ways that we know are unfair and unloving; some of us are not using our lives in the best possible way; some of us have marriages going down the tubes and down deep we know it is largely our fault, some of our young people are in rebellion against their parents, but in their hearts they know mom and dad are right. Yet, in all probability most of us will walk out of here this morning--and in spite of our very best intentions--we will keep on doing what we are doing. Now, why is that?

Well, the reason is that in spite of a desire to do right, we don't have the power to do right. Is that true in your life? I know it is in mine. Even when I am trying the hardest I can to be the best that I can I still fail. I just don't have the inner resources, the internal power to do what I want to do.

Do you know what we both need? We need God's costly forgiveness offered in Jesus, but we also need the inner power and strength of the Holy Spirit. You see, it is only as I have God's help, offered in his Spirit, that I can live out my forgiven life for God.

Do you know the Holy Spirit? Many Christians don't. They know about God. They know about Jesus. But there are three persons in the Trinity for there is the Holy Spirit also. I need him, too. And so do you! Without God's Spirit in my heart, giving me power, giving me aid, I always fail.

So, to be saved, to be forgiven and have eternal life, is a gift from God--a costly gift, the gift of his Son, for there is no cheap answer. But to live for God, to be God's man or God's woman; to live a life that is the life he wants from you and me, is more than we can give. But with his Spirit, he helps us become what he wants us to be.

Is there something missing in your spiritual life? Do you feel there ought to be more in your relationship to God? It may be that you have not opened your heart to receive the Holy Spirit, God's power in you. Now, that doesn't mean living for God is going to be easy. No, there is no cheap answer. It will still take all of your inner resources, all of your strength and effort, but you can live a new life if you have God's Spirit in your heart to help you.

The Bible says, "Be filled with the Holy Spirit." That is a command, not a request. To disobey that command is as sinful for the Christian as committing adultery, or stealing, or coveting, or any other sin. Are you filled with the Spirit?

No, there are no cheap answers to life. Some years ago in Texas I had on my staff an elderly gentleman, who was one of the finest human beings I have ever known. He had been in Africa for many, many years as a missionary and finally they had to send him home--he had gotten too old. But he wanted to work for the Lord so he came and served on our staff. He told me that when he went to the Congo it was his job to help translate the scripture into their language. He came to translate the phrase that is our text for this morning, where Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. He could not find the right word for comforter and he tried to explain that it was the spirit of God that encourages and protects, comforts, helps and guides. Suddenly they exclaimed, "Oh, if someone did that for us we would say he is the one who falls down beside us." Then they explained. When a porter in a jungle trip must carry a heavy load for many weary miles through the brush and the jungle, he may become sick and gradually drop back to the end of the carriers. Finally, he may collapse and during the night may be killed by the wild animals. But if someone comes along and sees him, and stoops to pick him up, helps him with his burden, and leads him back to safety, they speak of such a person as "The one who falls down beside us." So the missionary had his translation of the Comforter--one who falls down beside us.

I don't know about you, but as I try to carry my burdens alone, I fall behind and I stumble and fall, but God gives me a promise--of one who comes and falls down beside me-- the Holy Spirit, God's power working within us to be God's person. Will you invite the one who falls down beside you into your heart?