

Sermon for Sunday, January 25, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"REMADE AT THE FACTORY"

St. John 3:1-15

Text: "Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew,
he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" St. John 3:3

It is generally accepted today in every intellectual and scientific discipline that mankind has some problems. Man is not exactly who and what he should be and personally I don't know anybody who is everything he wants to be. If we have any doubts about man's breakdown, all we have to do is scan the papers each day. There we discover rather quickly that man has an awful lot of flaws. If we bought a car with as many problems as we see in humankind we would call it a lemon. We would demand that the auto dealer take the car and send it back to the factory for remaking or factory reconditioning.

So most people recognize that mankind is a lemon. Since we got turned out at the factory something has gone wrong with us. We don't function as we ought. We are not who and what we know we ought to be. Even St. Paul recognized he was a lemon. He said, "the things that I would, I do not; and the things that I would not, I do." He simply has not turned out the way the manufacturer intended. Are you discovering that in your life? I know I am. As I look at my life, as I see what I do, as I become aware of the things I think, I know I am not what God intended. I am a lemon. Is that true for you?

Well, what do you do with a lemon? How do you correct it, how do you recondition it or overhaul it or remake it? The fact is, a lot of different people are telling us what we ought to do to renovate and factory recondition mankind. For example, the sociologist says we need better environment. He says we are shaped by the mores and folkways of the culture into which we are born. He tells us that we are determined by our social environment. In order to remake man, he says, we need only to change the bad elements in man's environment. Consequently, man's reconditioning depends on better housing, eradication of slums, wiping out of poverty, removing unemployment and abolishing racial discrimination. But while most of us feel these things will probably help, how does that explain wealthy kids taking drugs, a prominent physician murdering his wife, or why our divorce rate is so high in upper middle-class homes?

Others say we are physiologically determined. What we need, they say, is better ancestors. At birth our sex is settled, the frame of our body is already determined, our mental capacities are fixed. Probably our temperament, our capacities, our inclinations are all fixed at birth. We are what we are because that's the way we were born. To renovate and remake man needs only some genetic engineering. But are you willing to accept that diagnosis? It is a harsh determinism, a hard predestination, which we find incompatible with our own experience. It is a view that says we are totally determined at conception. A beautiful painting, a moving piece of music, a great novel, a lovely poem would be nothing by the consequence of the chance combination of some genes and chromosomes.

There are others who tell us that we are emotionally determined. They say we need better self-understanding. They say that we are the result of the emotional forces that have been let loose in our lives or which have pressed in upon us. We are what we are because of emotions that have been fanned to burning heat, or repressed in the depths of the sub-conscious, or warped and twisted in distorted pervision. What we need they say is psychotherapy that will give us better understanding of the forces let loose in our lives. But what meaning does life have if all of us are but the helpless victims of cruel emotional forces that twist and distort us?

There are others who tell us that what we really need is better chemicals. Today some medical scientists are learning to control human behavior by pharmacological agents. Dr. B. F. Skinner of Harvard has been quoted as saying, "We are entering the age of the chemical control of human behavior. The motivational and emotional conditions of normal daily life probably will be sustained in any desired state through the use of drugs." And while this is an increasingly real possibility, surely something of the meaning and dignity of personhood will have vanished when we are what we are because of a chemical reaction.

The fact is, in each of these views there is a certain element of truth. Each of these solutions to man's condition has some validity. But when we have changed our environment, when we have engineered our genes, when we have discovered our emotional traumas, when we have taken the best chemicals, will we become what we were meant to be? Will we be completely reconditioned and remade, factory new? Or will we still be a lemon? Suppose you get a car from the factory that has a defective engine. You can put the best gas and oil in that car, you can put new tires on it, you can give it a fresh paint job, you can reupholster the interior, but the car still won't run properly. It will still be a lemon. It needs to go back to the factory and get a new engine.

Well, that's what Jesus told Nicodemus that day. He told him that if he was going to be what God wanted him to be he had to go back to the factory and get a new spiritual engine. He told him he had to be remade at the factory, he had to be born again. Jesus told Nicodemus that that which was made of the flesh was flesh, but that which was spirit was born of the spirit. He told him that he ought not to marvel that he needed to be remade at the factory, to be born again.

Now, if Jesus had been talking to the woman at the well, we could have understood that. It was obvious she was a lemon for she had been married five times, running from husband to husband. If it had been the woman taken in adultery, we could have understood that. After all, they had caught her in immorality and it was obvious she was a lemon. If it had been Zacchaeus, we could have understood that. Obviously he was a lemon because he had cheated and stolen his way up the ladder of success. But Jesus was talking to a deeply religious man, a ruler of the Jewish people, a member of the Session at the First Presbyterian Synagogue of Jerusalem. It was to this man to whom Jesus said, "There is a factory recall on you. You must return to the maker and be completely reconditioned at the factory. You must be born again."

How about you? As you look at yourself--who and what you are--do you need only to be repaired a little? Will a little moral patching do the job? Will a little better attitude do the job? Will a new coat of will power make you over? I don't know about you, but that's never helped me very much. It doesn't get at my real problem, my real dilemma. No, there is a factory recall out on me. I'm a real lemon and what I need is a new engine, a new spirit. I need to be born again.

Someone has said that you can scrub a pig, sprinkle him with Channel No. 5, tie a big bow on his tail, and keep him in your living room--and he will still jump into the first mud puddle he sees. That's because his nature hasn't been changed. He is still a pig. I think that is true for you and me. It doesn't matter how much we change our outer trappings; it doesn't matter how much we tinker with our environment, our genetics, our emotions, or how much drugs we take. What we really need is a new spirit, a new heart. We need factory reconditioning, we need to be born again.

Whoever you are this morning, you need what I need. There is a factory recall out on us. We are a couple of lemons and our manufacturer wants to remake us. That's the first thing we need to understand this morning.

The second thing we need to understand is this: if you want to be remade you can be. In the Old Testament Ezekiel speaks of it. God says, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you." (Ezek. 36:26) Peter speaks of it. In Acts we read, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38) Paul speaks of it. He writes to the Corinthinas, "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come." (5:17) And Jesus speaks of it. He said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit." (St. John 3:6)

Is it truly possible for you and me to be remade at the factory? Is it really possible that God's desire for us is to give us a new heart, a new spirit? Is it really true that our manufacturer wants to recall us and make us into new creatures? If it isn't true then the Bible is a lie. If it isn't true then Jesus was a farce, a charlatan, a fraud. If it isn't true then men who claimed their lives were changed were deceiving us. If it is not possible to be remade, reborn, then for centuries the church has been built on a lie.

But what if it is true? What if there is a recall out on us and God does want to change us, remake us. Wouldn't it be foolish not to turn ourselves in?

That's the third thing I want to say this morning. To be remade at the factory by your manufacturer, you have to turn yourself in. You must place your life in God's hands. You must surrender yourself to him.

Over two years ago I got a notice from the Ford Motor Company about my car. They said there was a defect in the design of the fan on my motor and if I would bring it in, they would correct it. I didn't do it. Some months ago I got a second notice reminding me of the problem and offering to fix it if I brought my car in. The notice is still on my dresser. I've been too busy, its too much trouble to take the car in, I keep meaning to do it but I never have. Maybe they won't send me another notice--maybe this is the last one. Will I ever take my car in?

Well, there is a factory recall out on you and me. How many notices have you gotten? How many times have you been told you need to be born again? Have you turned yourself in yet? Have you put yourself in God's hands yet? If not, do you think you ever will? How many more notices do you think you will get?