

Rise Up and Make a Change: Here's Your Second Chance!

A sermon based on Acts 9:1-19

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

Take a moment and think about how you would fill in the blank for the following statement: "If I could go back in time to _____ (either a day, a place, an event), I would do _____ (what) differently." Take a second.

What is it for you? "If I could go back in time to that huge exam I didn't do so well on last week, I would have taken my time instead of rushing through so I could hang out with my friends more...or I would have spent more than just a few minutes before class studying so I was better prepared."

"If I could go back to that fight the wife and I had the other night, it was so long, so intense, so frustrating, I would have just bit my tongue, since it wasn't even something worth fighting about...or I would have tried to see it from her perspective instead of just thinking about me and how I always have to win that fight."

"If I could go back years to when I was a silly and immature teenager who didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, I'd shake that boy senseless and tell him to go to college, get a degree, do something...or I'd encourage him to take a risk, dream big, and jump in with both feet."

"If I could go back to when Grandpa was still alive but nearing the end, I would have made the effort to spend more time with him...or I would have told him more often how much I love him, how much he meant to me, how thankful I was for him."

"If I could..." What is it for you? Raise your hand if you've never had that happen to you before. I didn't think so. Part of being a cognitive human being is our ability to reflect on past experiences. It's good sometimes to think back, analyze, evaluate, isn't it? It prepares us for if/when a similar experience happens again. But then sometimes, it's just painful or depressing, isn't it? Why? Because no matter what we do, the past is still the past. Doc isn't coming anytime soon with his DeLorean to whisk you back to change your past (although, if the Back to the Future movies are any indication, odds are pretty good we'd screw things up worse than we did the first time anyways). You won't wake up tomorrow (and the next day and the next day) to the same tune on your clock radio as you did this morning, getting to redo the day over and over and over again until you get it right, like in Groundhog Day.

The past is the past, and that's just it. I can't go back and spend more quality time with Grandpa who isn't around anymore. That exam I bombed? The grade is already final; there's nothing I can do to change that. The fight my wife and I had? Forgiveness has been given, but we can't unsay what was said.

Sometimes in life, we just don't get second chances.

And when it comes to this life, we don't get a second chance. You know, Buddhists and Hindus believe in reincarnation, that if you screw up this life, just wait for your next life. You might have to start out a little lower on the totem pole, but you have the opportunity to do better.

In theory, that would be awesome. Then I could study harder for my exam. Then I could always treat my wife like the precious gift from God she really is. Then I could go to school for the dream job I've always wanted. That would be great.

But it's not reality.

Here's what God says in the book of Hebrews, "People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." That's reality.

This life is our chance. Not just to make the best decisions for me...make it the best life for me. That'd be underselling it. No, more importantly, this life is my chance...your chance to please God. And friends, it doesn't take much to please God...just one thing, really. Perfection. "Be holy," is how God says it in the Old Testament. Jesus' words in the New Testament echo, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Just one thing: be perfect. Don't sin.

And yet, you know as well as I do, this one thing God wants? Not simple...at all.

What are you doing with your chance? We can see so many examples from Scripture of people who screwed up with theirs. King David, already had a wife, yet we can see how his idle hands became the devil's workshop, first with his own form of pornography in watching Bathsheba bathe, which led to adultery, which led to lying, which led to murder. Or how about a little earlier in Acts, Ananias and Sapphira, who sold their land and gave most of the proceeds to the church but kept some for themselves. Nothing inherently wrong with that, except in their greed for money and praise they lied and said they gave everything to the church (and really, to God). Peter, Jesus' best friend, swore, "When the others abandon you, Jesus, I'll never leave you." Pretty bold, that is, until they came with swords and clubs or until he got backed into a corner about being a follower of Jesus. Then he swore, "I don't know the man."

And then here we have Saul/Paul, someone who was so zealous for God and yet so misguided, that he vehemently persecuted Christians, probably even put some to death. And yet, when Jesus confronted him, it wasn't Christians Saul was persecuting. It was Jesus.

Friends, we're no different. We have the chance every day to remain sexually pure, whether you're married, dating, or happily single. All your thoughts, words, actions...have they, do they reflect that? In this life, God blesses you far beyond your imagination in order for you to be generous back to him with your money, your time, your abilities. And you give back, first of all, and when you give, every time it's cheerful and unselfish, right? I wish that were me. The opportunities you're given to stand up for Jesus, to let others know we belong to him (which we've made the promise to God to do), and you've never shied away...you've never disowned him.

And of course, unlike Saul, you've never persecuted Jesus, which would basically mean you've never sinned because anything which harms the body of Christ, those who belong to the body of Christ, believers...anything which harms the body of Christ is a slight and a blow to Christ as well. Do you do that?

Let's not kid ourselves. God says live to perfection and a quick look at even just today shows what we've done with that chance. We've mucked it up. Every day we mess up our opportunities to live without

sin. That's reality. And the reality, again, is after this life, there is no second chance. If we can't...if we don't live to perfection, there's no second chance.

It's like an illustration I use in my Bible Information Classes. Imagine between us and heaven is this huge chasm, a hundred-foot wide canyon. To get to heaven, we have to jump. I've heard it said there's nothing riskier than trying to jump across a canyon in 2 leaps. Do you get it? In this life, you get one chance at perfection. It doesn't matter whether you can jump 40 feet, 95 feet, or if you even trip and fall 6 inches. In God's eyes, a miss is a miss. Any level of failure of perfection is complete failure. And we don't get a re-test. It's pass/fail. If it's not an 'A,' it's an 'F,' and 'F' means eternal failure. It means hell. That's reality.

What if you could have a second chance? What would you do with it? What changes would you make?

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Take a look at those words of Jesus in our verses here. What do you see? Yeah, certainly the full force of the Law, hitting Saul like a ton of bricks, putting his persecution, his sin into perspective. Look again "Saul, Saul" was really an expression of loving concern on the Lord's part, like when he said, "Martha, Martha" or "Jerusalem, Jerusalem."

This wasn't Jesus who wanted to strike Saul down dead where he stood. This was Jesus who wanted to Saul to make a change. This was Jesus who wanted to give him a second chance. Read the rest of Acts, read Romans, read the Corinthian letters, you can see the change in Paul...from self-appointed crusader for Judaism to God-appointed defender of the way. Paul, who knew himself to be the chief of sinners and knew Jesus to be the Savior of sinners.

He's not the only one who needed the second chance, though. What about us? Do we get a second chance?

By the grace of God, we do. Here's why. You and I get a second chance at this life because of him who needed no second chance with his. And it wasn't for a lack of the devil trying. The book of Hebrews tells us, "We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin." Without sin. Never screwed up. Was perfect, just as God demands. Heaven was his.

And Jesus gave it all away. At the cross, Jesus willingly took our mucked up chances, our failures, our sins, and he died for them. He suffered the reality of our hell for them. And he gave us perfection...his perfection. And to top it off, he rose from the grave. And friends, that's not just a footnote to Jesus' work here. Reba McEntire (yep, the country singer, weird, I know!) once said, "Easter is very important to me, it's a second chance." Do you understand what she meant? How is Easter your second chance?

Two ways. First, because Jesus rose, death has been defeated...for him, for you, for me. And second, Easter, Jesus' resurrection, is your new lease on life. Jesus' work of salvation is done. He lived, died, and rose for you. Sin, death, and the devil have been struck down. And Jesus has raised you up from the depths of sin and God's wrath to his full and free forgiveness. Because Jesus lives, he has given us new life...a second chance.

And it's not only through Easter we get that second chance. Your second chance came through baptism, when God washed away your sins and made you his child. Your second chances come from the Lord's Supper, where Jesus' body and blood, given and shed for you, make his blood-bought forgiveness yours. Your second chances come through confession/absolution, where I get to serve as your Ananias and

assure you of God's forgiveness. Your second chances come every day, where God's Word reminds you his mercies are new every morning. Basically, every time you hear the gospel, you get the second chance...we might even say the third, fourth, even 300th, 400th chances...all because of the grace of God.

So many chances to get things right. What are you going to do? We're going to get serious. Right, if knowing what you know now, that Grandpa was going to die soon, you wouldn't put off visiting him for "just a few more days." If you knew this exam would be so difficult, you'd spend the week studying for it. If you knew these petty arguments would cause so much angst in your marriage, you work harder to make it so they won't even start.

You know as well as I do how second chances are too precious to just waste away. So, when we get them, we get serious about them, and we make a change. Will living for God be any different? You know, it's easy to take God's forgiveness lightly, that it'll always be there...until it's not anymore.

Friends, no more wasting it. Let's make the change now. If you know sexual impurity is your vice, repent, and then make the change, even if it means you can't watch your favorite show anymore or if you have to work harder to not dwell on those thoughts the devil puts in your head. If you want to be the kind of steward God wants you to be, maybe you will have to physically spend the time working on your budget or on your schedule so when it comes to giving back to God, you can give your free time or your money and do so cheerfully and willingly not so begrudgingly or accompanied by worrying. If you're serious about loving God, then work at doing what he says, not just when you feel like it, or when you're here at church, but all the time, every moment, every day.

Now, will you fall off the horse? Probably. You're still a sinner. But what do you do when you're down? You repent, thank God for the second chance of his forgiveness. You rise up, and you get right back on.

Friends, making the change, it's not easy. The apostle Paul can attest to that. Going from being a persecutor of Jesus to a messenger for Jesus was not easy. Again, you could read the rest of Acts, Romans, the Corinthians letters, and so on, but even just look here, what Jesus said, "This man is my chosen instrument...I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Think about why you're making the change. It's "for my name." It's all for Jesus. Think about the people in your life you love the most...your spouse, a parent, maybe your child, a good friend...what would you do for them? What will you do for the one who loved you enough to live, die, and rise for you?

"If I could go back in time to _____ (either a day, a place, an event), I would do _____ (what) differently." Friends, the past is the past; it can't be changed. Thankfully, for you, your past is Jesus...his life, his death, his resurrection...your forgiveness. That can't/won't be changed. But you can change now. Thank God for second chances, and may he motivate you, empower you, and work through you to rise up and make a change...for his name. Amen.