



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

We Never Make Mistakes

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ AUGUST 28, 2022

OLD TESTAMENT READING

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the LORD God had made. One day he asked the woman, “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?”

²“Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” the woman replied. ³“It’s only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, ‘You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.’”

⁴“You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. ⁵“God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.”

⁶The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. ⁷At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.

⁸When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees. ⁹Then the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

¹⁰He replied, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked."

¹¹"Who told you that you were naked?" the LORD God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?"

¹²The man replied, "It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

¹³Then the LORD God asked the woman, "What have you done?"

"The serpent deceived me," she replied. "That's why I ate it."

Genesis 3:1-13 (NLT)

NEW TESTAMENT READING

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

James 5:16 (NLT)



The Lie

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, survivor of the Soviet Gulag and brilliant Christian analyst of the human condition, wrote two short stories in Russian published together (although they were banned in Moscow, of course) with the combined title "We Never Make Mistakes." In the first story, those are the words proclaimed by a Communist bureaucrat (known as an "apparatchik," a piece of the machinery or "apparatus") to try to cover up an obvious administrative blunder. It captured perfectly the arrogance, the willful blindness and the lies that were at the very core of the Soviet system. And everyone knew it was a lie. Of course people make mistakes. Of course governments make mistakes. Of course corporations, and medical professionals, and mechanics, and lawyers, and plumbers, and school teachers and their students, and parents, and everyone else are prone to mistakes. It's the sad condition of humanity: We are all flawed.

Solzhenitsyn in his day labored mightily to shine the bright light of truth into the dark places. Today I will try to do the same, with much less eloquence. We will look honestly at a common human experience, following a logical sequence of these four steps:

- ◆ A Toxic Behavior and its Consequences
- ◆ The Cause of that Behavior
- ◆ The Remedy for the Poison
- ◆ The Results of the Remedy

A Toxic Behavior

The behavior we are focusing on is that of refusing to admit when we are wrong, when we've blundered, when we've hurt someone else, when we've willfully acted selfishly. The words of the self-deluded apparatchik are not surprising. We've all denied something we've done. It is certainly a characteristic of every tyrannical and totalitarian regime; Vladimir Putin never admits he's wrong, nor does the Chinese Communist Party. Regrettably, so do many of our own American politicians (without naming names or parties—but you see it every time you turn on a news broadcast).

And this toxin has spread through our society. Not only do governments not want to admit their mistakes and poor decisions and failed policies, but private companies likewise stonewall (typically behind phalanxes of lawyers). In the same way, our social interactions are poisoned, on down to our own personal relationships with family and friends. Instead of being honest and admitting our mistakes and wrongs, we adopt a whole arsenal of defensive weapons. Among the most popular weapons to deflect responsibility: blaming others and scapegoating, lying, covering up, changing the topic, excuse-making and self-justification. Often our lies are more obvious and transparent than we think. The result is a loss of trustworthiness, a destruction of credibility, a creeping suspicion and hostility.

The Cause

What causes this toxic behavior that so damages our human relationships? At the core it springs from that most basic and foundational of all sins: Pride. Pride isn't just exhibited in boastful arrogance, the caricature of the proud bantam rooster with puffed-out chest. It can be so much more subtle and pervasive. Pride is really just self-centeredness. It is caring more about our own interests or self-protection than it is about God, or others, or even right and wrong.

The original prototype of human sin was unveiled in our Old Testament passage, the well-known and tragic account of Adam and Eve's horrific blunder. How did the Evil One tempt them? With half-truths that appealed to their self-interest. "Wouldn't you like to taste that forbidden fruit? Wouldn't you like to be equal to God? Wouldn't you like to get what you deserve? Go ahead. Nobody will know."

Every human can relate to this story. Even those who don't believe Adam and Eve were literally the first human beings can recognize the truthfulness of this story, because we have replicated it in our own lives. And look at the immediate response of the guilty two-some in Genesis 3, when God confronted them with the truth. They tried to deny and to blame somebody else. Strong and manly Adam attempted to throw his dear wife under the proverbial bus: "She made me do it." Eve quickly tried to shift the blame with the classic comedian's line "The Devil made me do it." The cover-ups, the scapegoating, the avoidance of responsibility, the fudging of truth: everything we see around us today started right there.

Fallibility is baked into the human recipe. We are all flawed. We all make mistakes, we are all by nature self-centered, and we are all prone to doing things wrong, intentionally or unintentionally. Nobody is perfect, and nobody is uniformly good.

It's true of our most highly-trained professionals. Scientists make mistakes. Mathematicians make mistakes. Economists make mistakes. Hedge fund managers make mistakes. Software coders make

mistakes. Presidents make mistakes. Doctors make mistakes. Sometimes they are whoppers.

It really happened to a member of our church in the past year. I won't mention the name or the gender, but I guarantee it's true. After a month of knee pain, the person got an MRI that revealed a torn meniscus. Outpatient surgery was scheduled with one of our top local orthopedic surgeons. All the pre-op procedures had been done by the staff; the surgeon stopped by and hastily signed with a sharpie pen the knee to be scoped. The patient was anesthetized and wheeled into surgery. The fully-scrubbed surgeon began by making an incision. But when he looked at what the scope revealed, he was surprised by what he found. "This doesn't look right. It's not the same knee we saw on the scans." He pulled the sheet off the other knee, and there was his signature. They had begun an operation on the wrong knee! We never make mistakes? Obviously that surgeon did.

And we all do. Pastors make mistakes. I make mistakes; I do things I'm ashamed of; I'm careless and self-centered and insensitive. I'd like to delude myself, and fool you in the process, that I am above these things. But that would be a lie.

Let's just imagine that you do something wrong. You know it. And your pride tells you that you have to keep other people from knowing this, so they will continue to think of you as being a wonderful, flawless person. Except that nobody else thinks that about you! The rest of us all know that you're not perfect, because we know we're not perfect either—and no one is. So all your efforts to hide your mistake in order to preserve your self-created reputation of infallibility are foolish.

The Remedy

What's the remedy for the toxicity? To admit, to confess, to repent, to come clean. It's that simple (and yet, of course, it's so hard to do for self-centered and proud human beings). When we admit the truth and apologize, we open the door for forgiveness and reconciliation.

We do the one thing that has the potential to put the past behind us. Burying, denying and covering up don't always work and can be highly risky. Telling the truth, saying "I'm sorry," taking responsibility: that's the path forward. Admitting we were wrong can actually enhance our credibility and trustworthiness with others.

Of course it needs to be real and genuine. We've all heard the phony "mea culpas" from celebrities and politicians caught in their mistakes, which sound exactly like what they are: insincere "apologies" written by a lawyer or PR person. Honesty sounds very different. I believe this is what James is talking about in our New Testament verse. I do **not** think he's talking about some formal religious ritual of confession and repentance.

When I was traveling with a group from our church in Europe last month, we walked through an immense and lavish cathedral in one of the big cities. Tucked against one wall was its "confessional": an enclosed booth that consisted of a center compartment for the priest, with cells on either side for people to anonymously slip in, offer their confessions, and receive their directed penance. That was decidedly not a practice of the church in New Testament times, but an invention many centuries later. All James is saying is to be honest with one another, admit our mistakes and hurtful actions, and allow the healing power of forgiveness to do its work.

The Result

This leads to our final step: the result of what Scripture calls us to do. When we apologize and are forgiven, it heals both our inner conscience and our relationship with the other person. It's such a powerful medicine. Even if the other person doesn't accept the apology, we can at least release the guilt and discomfort within ourselves, knowing we have been honest and followed the teaching of the Bible.

Whatever wounds may be inflicted on other people by our actions, when we sin and disobey our conscience we also have created a barrier between ourselves and our Creator. He made us to live in harmony

with Himself and with the people around us. When that harmony is broken by our actions (or our failure to act), we need that upward relationship with God—as well as our horizontal relationship with the other person—to be restored. That’s why it’s vital that we come clean; we confess our sins and failures with the confidence that He is a merciful, forgiving God. We release our sins because they were nailed to the cross through Jesus’ hands and feet. We allow ourselves to be bathed in His forgiveness, because this is the only way to be cleansed and made whole within.

Washed Clean

From ancient Greek mythology 600 years before the birth of Christ comes an epic poem about the fictional heroic exploits of Hercules. Number Five of the “Twelve Labors of Hercules” was to clean out the legendary Augean stables. These massive barns were filled with a thousand livestock, which, predictably, produced huge amounts of waste. The job was so big that the servants of King Augeas continually failed to keep up with this gigantic task. Unable to shovel out the dung, it just kept piling up, and they just kept throwing more straw on it. The stables were an incredible mess. How could even Hercules, that mighty man of near-superhuman strength, possibly accomplish such a task?

But Hercules wasn’t just strong; he was also clever. He came up with an ingenious solution to the problem of the filthy stables. Rather than trying to shovel it all by hand, he went to the two nearby streams. He removed some rocks from their banks and dug a channel to bring them together, thereby directing what was now a swift-flowing river right through the stables, washing them clean.

I hope this illustration isn’t too much of a reach for you. But think of it this way: When we break our word, violate our conscience, hide behind lies and self-justifications, and in the process hurt other people, we are piling up refuse—like the overwhelming mess of the Augean stables. When we deny or try to excuse what we’ve done, we are simply shoveling more straw to cover up the filth.

But when we acknowledge what we've done, admit our mistakes and failures, and open ourselves up to the forgiveness of other people and God, we are channeling a powerful, cleansing river through us. We and our relationships are being washed clean and made new. It is what we all need and, deep down, what we all desperately want. ■

