

## Sermon for February 12 2006

### *Following God's Will*

#### Psalm 32 and Mark 1:15

This morning we are returning to our study of Life Shapes. These are geometric figures that better help us to understand how we can more intentionally live the Christian life. In the Autumn we looked at two shapes, the triangle and the semi circle. The triangle helped us to define those relationships that the bible says are most important:

- With God,
- the fellowship of believers
- and interacting with the larger world.

We looked at these relationships under the headings of:

- "Worshipping God"
- "Building his church"
- "Loving the world."

We then looked at the semi circle and learned something about the rhythm of the Christian's self-care. In this we discovered that balance is found in life when we learn to

- work from our rest rather than
- resting from our work.

(For these sermons and ones that introduced the theme of discipleship go to "Sermons 2005" September 4 - November 20)

We now turn to two sermons that will incorporate the use of a circle to help us to answer the question:

"How do we follow God's will?"

We will be thinking particularly about how we follow God's will as we examine our motives, thoughts and actions. As I was thinking about this

theme, the idea of this wooden maze game that was popular when I was a child came to mind. As we walk through the maze of life, following the will of God is like carefully maneuvering the knobs of the maze. Thankfully, because we live under grace, when we fall into one of the many holes that entrap us, we can start again.

It is the will of God that as we go through our lives we will eventually come to the end of life, made ready for the eternal life that awaits us. There is a theological word that is used to talk about our Christian journey through life. It is the word

➤ "sanctification."

This word sanctification is taken from the Latin word

➤ "santcus".

We see this word adorning the altar. It means "holy". To be holy does not mean to be holier than thou. Rather it is the word that most fully captures who God is. God is holy. He is complete, whole, full of beauty and perfection. As we cultivate a life of grace, centred in His will, God's holiness is imparted to us. We become more whole. Holiness is a word that is closely associated with the word joy. People who are holy are not better than other people, rather they are people who know the joy of intimacy with God. Psalm 32 speaks of this intimacy as a life marked by forgiveness and a fresh start.

This is a psalm that begins and ends with a description of what you and I can experience when we know we are forgiven. The opening verse affirms:

1 Blessed *is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered.*

The first verse says that when we know we are forgiven we are blessed. To be blessed it to know that we are learning to live in the will of God. The rest of the psalm will show us how we can do this. When we are living in his will, we don't have to pretend the sin didn't happen, nor do we have to try and cover it up. Sin does need to be covered, but not by us. Rather we can give thanks that God covers up our sin with the shed blood of Jesus Christ. When we know this, we are in a blessed state indeed.

Now cast your eye down to verse 11. Here we are encouraged to "be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous. Shout for joy, all you upright in heart."

As we will see, those who are righteous and upright in heart are men and women who continually experience the cleansing waters of forgiveness. They are not people who always do the right thing but those who know that when we have said and done the wrong thing we can turn to God. Or to return to the analogy of our wooden maze, when we have been entrapped by sin and fallen into the hole, God lifts us up and says, "Here try again."

The Psalm 32 is a powerful poem teaching that the path to beatitude is confession. In a scarred world of sin, we are as often the *perpetrators* of wrong as we are victims of it. Fight though we may to combat sin, the unhappy fact is that whether you are nine-years-old or ninety, confessing sin is like taking out the garbage: once is not enough--in fact, you need to keep up with the task daily so the house doesn't start to stink!

True, some days we may have only the spiritual equivalent of a crumpled cereal box and a banana peel to carry out. But there are also those days when the trash has to go out because a chicken carcass and some bacon grease are rotting at the bottom of the kitchen garbage can. But whether it's some small lapse or a stunning misdeed, the truly honest among us admit that the core truth of Psalm 32 touches us every day.

Again, the very structure of the psalm makes this clear. Psalm 32 appears to have been written for use in worship. The opening and closing pairs of verses are the "lines" spoken by the priest. The priest begins by claiming that the path to beatitude, the way to be really blessed in life, is to be a person who knows he or she is forgiven by God. Following verse 2 you can almost hear the priest say, "For instance . . ." and then he would point to the person who speaks verses 3-7. This second voice in the psalm then becomes like a living example to substantiate the claim of the opening beatitude. The priest claims in verse 1, "Blessed is the one who knows her sins are forgiven."

Then just such a person chimes in and says in verse 3, "That's true! Look at me! When I kept quiet about what I had done, I was miserable. Day

and night I was tormented by the thought that there was something out of alignment between the Master of the universe and me. Finally I couldn't take it anymore and so I spilled the beans. And, *Voila!*, God took away my guilt by forgiving me in something quicker than the blink of an eye!"

3 When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long.

4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.

The metaphors used in these verses are so vivid. Un-confessed sin resulted in the psalmist experiencing at the core of his being a groaning and aching. As we grow in Christ, living under grace, and living out the will of God results in this experience. Whereas when we lived away from Christ, we didn't necessarily experience the agony of un-confessed sin, when the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, he can convict us of sin in ways that leave us disquieted and unsettled. David, then builds on the metaphor of verse three. In verse four he describe feeling as drained as on a day when the temperatures are in the 30s, the humidity index is pushing ninety percent. There is a spiritual lethargy and exhaustion that accompanies this state.

Yet when he is able to confess his sin it is like a cool front moving in. The humidity breaks, the temperature drops, and his spiritual vitality returns.

5 I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.

This is one of my favourite psalm verses. No longer covering up his sin, he confesses it. Notice he doesn't make excuses for his action but names it for what it is. It is my iniquity, my transgressions. It is my wrong doing, and I name it for what it is. What David experiences in a personal way described here in verse five, is articulated as a general beatitude back in verse 2:

2 Blessed *is* the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit *there is* no deceit.

This verse teaches that there is something God does which is the far greater thing and something that happens to us when we are learning to live a life of forgiveness. God does not impute iniquity to us. That means he doesn't keep track of our wrong doing. He lets it go. When we know that this is the character of God it changes us. We become people who are filled with honesty and no longer tell lies. I like the way The Message puts this verse:

"GOD holds nothing against you and you're holding nothing back from him."

C.S. Lewis's once advised that we find ways to talk about our own lives in the same way and with the same vocabulary by which we describe other people. We need to use simple, plain, old-fashioned words like theft, lust, anger, envy, pride, and selfishness when describing not just Harold and Josephine but *ourselves*. Weaving such blunt descriptions into our own prayers of confession may be uncomfortable, even painful, but they lead to the joy and wholeness with which Psalm 32 ends.

It takes this kind of honesty in order for us to experience the joy of forgiveness. David says that he came to know that God forgave the iniquity of his sin. Another version of this psalm puts it this way: God forgave me the guilt of all my sin. What a grace to have the guilt of sin lifted. A grace that allows us to shout out "Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all *you* upright in heart!"

Now as we move to verse eight a third voice is introduced to the psalm. God bursts onto the scene and promises:

8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.

9 Do not be like the horse *or* like the mule, *Which* have no understanding, Which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, Else they will not come near you.

David's uprightness in heart grows out of being forgiven. It is God's will for David and for us that forgiveness allows God to speak tenderly to us.

Things are so correct now between this sinner and God that God can speak tenderly and directly. God is not aloof, sitting off in a corner with his arms crossed over his chest and a stern look in his eye. No, he's tenderly, personally present, offering further instruction so that from here on out maybe life will go a bit better for this person. This is how God works in our lives. Rather than having to maneuver the maze by ourselves God says to us, here, let me help you. Let me guide you through life.

Such guidance isn't to be forced or manipulated as if you were a horse or mule. I want you to freely trust me. Because as you do you will know what it is to be free.

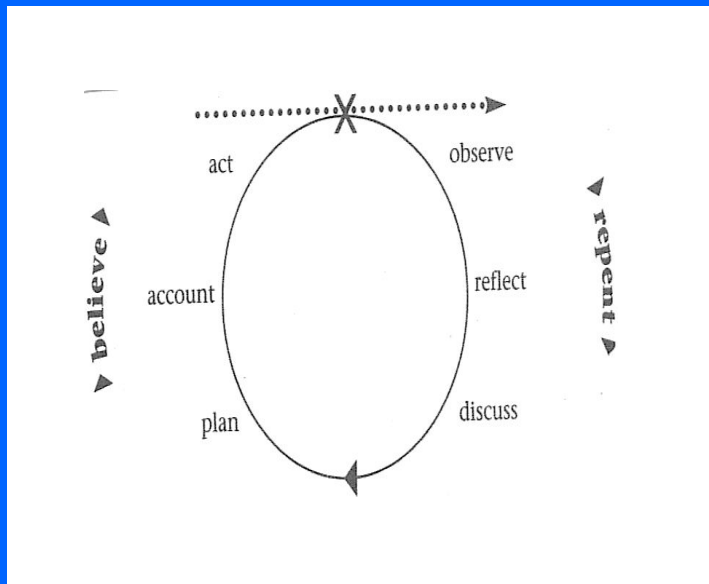
Finally, in the last two verses the voice of the priest returns. With a smile on his face, he proclaims that his opening beatitude has now been proven. "Yahweh's unfailing love, his grace, surrounds us. We're hemmed in by God's good heart. God's got us surrounded! There's no escaping his mercy! And so rejoice! Sing! Be glad! We've got a God who makes forgiving us the #1 item on his list of things to do every day."

Psalm 32 reveals a biblical irony: as grim, dark, and awful as sin is, *dealing* with this same sin leads to joy! Sin may be the "bad news" of life, it may be every bit the "downer" and "guilt-inducer". But Psalm 32 is one of a legion of biblical texts which reminds us that the path to lilting joy leads right through sin. Indeed, some of the most effusive passages in the Bible are the ones that talk the most about sin. Because when you've got a God who drips with grace like our God does, the bottom line is never just about sin but about how swiftly God *forgives* sin!

So how do we cultivate a life where we are living this way. It is here that the shape comes into play and where the passage Liz read from Mark is instructive. In that passage Jesus says that we are to repent and believe. To repent means to change directions, to confess sin, to turn around. Verses 3-7 of psalm 32 are a description of repentance. Verses 8-11 are a description of the belief that follows from repentance.

To conclude this morning's sermon I want to introduce the circle. We will then consider it in more detail next week. I want to show you how the circle can help guide us in practicing repentance and belief:

# Following God's Will



It involves three steps on the repentance process. They are

- Observe
- Reflect
- Discuss

There are three parts to the believe process

- Plan
- Account
- Act

The first part of the repent process is observation. To change our lives, we need to observe where we are. When we become aware of an area of sin in our lives this is the time to observe our reactions, our emotions, our thoughts. We must be honest in our observations—see things as they are—if we are to change inwardly. Once we observe our condition, we need to reflect. Reflect on what?

Well, reflect on our observations. We need to ask ourselves why we reacted as we did, why we feel as we do, why a certain event brought these emotions to the surface. Asking questions is a great way to reflect. Again, our answers must be honest if real change is to take place. If observing and reflecting are to lead to lasting change, we must invite others into the process with us. For repentance to take hold, we've got to share it with someone else. It is important that we have others in our lives we can discuss our observations and reflections with, and who will be honest in their response to us. These people must be strong enough to handle confession, be it small or large, and share God's grace and forgiveness with us. These are trustworthy friends, who will stand with us, pray with us, fight alongside of us, but will not flatter us with empty words. "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16)

Repentance is necessary if we are to grow as disciples, but it is not always easy. Facing our failings, our pain, and our fears is something we want to put off, like a trip to the dentist or bathing the cat. As we step into the process of observing, reflecting on, and discussing our sins and shortcomings with others, we are not only opening up the ugliness of our lives for others to see, we are opening it up for us to see.

Dr. Larry Crabb wrote, "A spiritual community consists of people who have the integrity to come clean. It is compromised of those who own their shortcomings and failures because they hate them more than they hate the shortcomings and failures of others, who therefore discover that a well of pure water flows beneath their most fetid corruption."

It is as we enter into the circle of repentance that we can discover this pure water. A water that is so refreshing and good that we exclaim:

*1 Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered.*

*11 Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!*