

Joshua 24:14-18

Romans 6:1-11

June 21, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

BE WHO YOU ARE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

John Calvin Coolidge was born on the 4th of July in Vermont. After making his name and career in Massachusetts politics, he was nominated and elected as the Republican vice-president under Warren G. Harding. When President Harding suddenly died in 1923, Coolidge became president and was elected in his own right the next year. Known as “Silent Cal,” he has been described as “a man who said very little and had a rather dry sense of humor.”

There is the famous story about the American poet and satirist Dorothy Parker sitting next to President Coolidge at a dinner party. She turned to him and said, “Mr. President, I made a bet with a man that I could get more than two words out of you.” President Coolidge replied, “You lose.” When it was announced that “Silent Cal” had died, Dorothy Parker said, “How can they tell?”

The President’s Democrat opponents used to tell a joke about President Coolidge attending Sunday worship by himself, while the First Lady stayed at the White House. When he returned from worship, Mrs. Coolidge asked the President about the minister’s sermon topic. The President replied, “He spoke about sin.” The First Lady wanted more information than that, so she pressed her husband: “What did he say about it?” “Silent Cal” drily replied, “He was against it.”

It took the apostle Paul quite a few more words than “Silent Cal” used to describe his preacher’s position on sin, but Paul came to the same conclusion: he was against it. In fact, Paul was so against sin that he forcefully argued against the conclusion that we ought to continue in sin so that we can get more and more of God’s grace. It just doesn’t work that way, Paul says. You don’t understand, he argues — “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” (Romans 6:2) Paul concludes his argument with this exhortation: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:11)

In 1988, at an advertising agency meeting, the now-famous slogan “Just Do It” was pitched to Nike, the athletic shoe company. In the next ten years, Nike’s North American share of the sport-shoe business increased from 18% to 43%. Along with the “Swoosh” logo, “Just Do It” has become an iconic business symbol.

If it were not for the amazing grace of God, Paul could be accused of promoting a brand of “Just Do It” theology. But we misunderstand Paul’s theology and set ourselves up for failure if we think Paul’s encouragement to “consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God” is a matter of “Just Do It.” In fact, the church rejected that kind of thinking way back in the 4th and 5th centuries when it declared Pelagianism a heresy. Pelagius was a British monk who taught that human beings have the free will to achieve

perfection on their own, without divine grace. His logic ran this way: God wouldn't command us humans to do the impossible. God commands us to fulfill his law. Therefore, it must be possible for us humans to fulfill God's commandments perfectly. One source puts it this way: "Pelagius accepted no excuse for sinful behavior and taught that all Christians, regardless of their station in life, should live unimpeachable, sinless lives."¹

In other words, "Just Do It." Or, to be more accurate, "Just **Don't** Do It." That's a nifty, short sermon, right in line with "Silent Cal's" summary of the preacher's stance on sin: "He was against it." But, the reality is, if I simply stood here today and exhorted you about sin "Just Don't Do It!" that would not be good news. When it comes to living a life pleasing to God, it would not be good news, if "Just Don't It" depended solely on our own efforts. Instead of good news, we would be frustrated again and again.

We would be frustrated again and again because sin is persistent and sneaky and seductive. Paul is not necessarily talking about the individual actions in our lives that we call "sins." [Even then, we get caught up in sinning. It's almost impossible, once we start naming our own sins, to keep from thinking about other people and concluding, "Well, I may not be perfect, but at least I don't do **that!**" And, just like that, sin grabs us!] No, Paul is talking about a way of life, an orientation toward or away from God.

Sin is pernicious in our lives, because it can get us either way. Either we claim to be better than we actually are (usually in a very humble way) or we try to avoid responsibility for our behavior. Two examples:

* The first example is John Bright, who was a 19th century English radical politician. He was at odds with and a critic of the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. Bright's scathing criticism of Disraeli was this: "He is a self-made man, who worships his creator." That's a pretty good description of what the apostle Paul is warning against when he writes about sin and grace in this section of his letter to the Romans. The temptation is to think we know better, that we can somehow achieve "the good life" by our own efforts, that we can somehow measure up to God's standards by the strength of our own will, and therefore make God indebted to us. But, Paul says, that only leads to us worshiping our creator as "self-made people," rather than worshiping and serving the one true God.

* The second example is Geraldine, the character of the preacher's wife, made famous by the comedian Flip Wilson. In 1969, Flip Wilson released his album called "The Devil Made Me Buy This Dress." In the skit, Geraldine returns home from shopping and her preacher husband asks her why she bought such an expensive dress. "The devil made me do it," Geraldine replies. The devil followed her down the street, forced her to look in the window of the dress shop, told her how good she looked in the dress, and forced her to sign her husband's name on the check. And, just like that, "The devil made me do it" became a handy excuse.

But Flip Wilson didn't invent that excuse. It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve both passed the buck and refused to take responsibility. "The devil made me do it" is exactly what the apostle Paul is arguing against when he writes, "How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us

who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” (Romans 6:2-3, 6)

Have you ever heard the phrase “being between Scylla and Charybdis”? It’s akin to being “between a rock and a hard place,” or being “between the devil and the deep blue sea.” In Greek mythology, Scylla was a dreaded six-headed sea monster on one side of a narrow strait. Charybdis was a dangerous whirlpool on the other side. Sailors had to navigate carefully between the two dangers — move too far away from one and the other one would get you. The Greek heroes Aeneas, Jason, and Odysseus all had to make their way between Scylla and Charybdis.

That’s the situation we find ourselves in when we try to navigate life without depending on God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ. We have to steer carefully between the Scylla of self-righteousness that comes from thinking we can do it all on our own and the Charibdys of passing the buck and not confessing and accepting the responsibility of our lives and actions.

If that seems like too bleak a picture, Paul offers us good news! “Therefore we have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life . . . But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” (Romans 6:4, 8)

It’s not too much of a simplification to say that, in his letters, Paul first writes about God’s amazing grace in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, does Paul offer his moral and ethical advice to the followers of Jesus Christ — Paul’s “Just Do It” campaign, if you will. So, you will notice, only after Paul tells the Roman Christians (and us) about how Christ’s death has broken the power of sin and how we share in that victory and power by being baptized into Christ’s death, does Paul get around to saying, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:11)

In so many words, Paul tells us “Be who you are” — not by the power of your own good intentions, not by racking up human accomplishments, not by keeping score in order to make yourself look better than other people, not by trying to put God into your debt. No, Paul says, “Be who you are” as believers who have been baptized into the death of Jesus Christ and given the gift of new life.

The “new life” comes to us a gracious gift from God. We do nothing to earn it, but it comes with a call and a claim upon our lives. That’s why Paul asks, “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” (Romans 6:2) As I was working on this sermon, I came across an interesting quotation from Dolly Parton, who said, “Find out who you are and do it on purpose.” That’s actually a pretty good commentary on these verses from Romans 6. Paul says, “Find out who you are . . .” You are a beloved child of God, you are baptized, you are claimed and marked as Christ’s own forever, you are a product of the grace of God. “Do it on purpose . . .” “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” — not by virtue of what you do on your own, but as a result of God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ.

I've shared this in sermons before, and folks always tell me, "I heard the same thing when I was growing up." I remember my parents telling me, when I would leave the house and, especially, when I headed off for college, "Remember who you are and where you come from." Sad to say, I didn't always heed their advice. But, that was good advice then, and it's still good advice today. And now, more than ever, I can still hear my mom and dad telling me "Remember who you are" and I try to "be who I am."

Francis de Sales was a 16th/17th century Catholic Bishop of Geneva who is honored as a saint in the Catholic Church. He is remembered for his deep faith and his gentle, pastoral approach to the religious divisions that resulted from the Protestant Reformation.

In a letter dated June 10, 1605 to Madame Marie Bourgeois Brulatto, the wife of the president of the Burgundian Parliament, he wrote, "Do not love anything too much, I beg you, not even virtues, which we sometimes lose by our excessive zeal . . . Let us be what we are and be that well, in order to bring honor to the Master Craftsman whose handiwork we are. People laughed at the painter who, intending to paint a horse, came up with a perfect bull; the work was handsome in itself, but not much credit to the artist who had other plans and succeeded in this one only by chance. Let us be what God wants us to be, provided we are His, and let us not be what we would like to be, contrary to His intention. Even if we were the most perfect creatures under heaven, what good would that do us if we were not as God's will would have us be?"²

For the record, in case anyone asks you later today what my sermon was about and you tell them "sin" and they want to know what I had to say about it, tell them, "He was against it!" But also tell them, "By the amazing grace of God, consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Be who you are!"

Let us pray: Almighty God, when we are faint-hearted, lift us up. Lift up our hearts so that we may perceive your will, lift up our minds so that we may understand your Word, lift up our strength so that we may be courageous in deed, and lift up our voices so that we may praise your Name. Lift us up, Almighty God: Alleluia! Amen.

NOTES

¹ "Pelagianism," at www.en.wikipedia.org.

² Father Horton, "St. Francis de Sales: Be what you are," October 1, 2016 at www.fauxtations.wordpress.com.