

“Intentional Turning”

One of the shifts in marketing strategies over the past several years has been a move away from companies asking people what they want (when it comes to their products) to looking at what they actually purchase when it comes to making the decision. It's not that their answers are dishonest, that they're trying to be deceptive in what they say, as much as the fact that their good intentions in what they (think they might want), don't always translate into intentionality.

A classic example of this was back in the 1990's when McDonalds responded to the requests of many of their customers for providing a healthier hamburger option to their menu. They had been hearing that if only there were a healthier option from which to choose, then that would be the choice they would make.

And so, McDonald's came up with that healthier option. Do you remember what it was? It was the McLean hamburger. It was 90% fat-free. Do you know what happened to the McLean? After the first year (or so), they realized it wasn't selling. It became known as the McFlopper. People were not buying it. In spite of what they said they wanted and what they intended to eat, when it came time to actually making the decision (and ordering), they went back to the Big Mac.

As a result of that (same trend), companies today are relying less and less on survey-based data and more and more on behavior-based data. It's not that people's intentions are not good. It's more that their intentions don't always lead to action.

In this series, we're dealing with that same phenomenon, the fact that there's this gap between what we say we want (in life) and the changes we know we need to make (in life) and what actually happens when it comes to what we do. It's not that we don't want to be more generous with our money, more deliberate when it comes to prayer and reading the Bible, more intentional in spending quality time with those we love, exercising and watching what we eat. We have good intentions. We're just not so intentional.

In this series, we're trying to close the gap; this gap between our intentions and what we end up doing. It's so common to the human experience that psychologists actually have a name for it. It's the intention – action gap. It's that space where many of us end up spending much of our lives. We have good intentions. We mean well. We just haven't got around to doing anything about it.

Now, let me say (up front) that this is not a series in how to be saved, end up in heaven. (We need to be clear.) That old saying, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” That might be true, but moving beyond your good intentions to action doesn't save you. Jesus saves you. His cross saves you. Everything you need (to be saved) has already been done (for you) by him. It's our faith in Christ that makes us right with God, gets us into the kingdom.

Having said that, nonetheless, there's oftentimes still this gap in (many of our lives), that if we are to be faithful in our calling and growing as disciples of Jesus, we need to move beyond it. We have these ideas. We have these plans and thoughts and things we know we need to change, and we mean it. We're sincerely committed. We have good intentions. We're just not as intentional.

And so we're spending these three weeks looking at one of the Old Testament kings who modeled intentionality. His name was Josiah. If you have your Bibles, we're in Second Kings, chapter 22.

Last week we started learning a little bit about Josiah. He's known for being the youngest king to take the throne at age eight. We also discovered that he was a man who grew up with a commitment to follow the Lord with all of his heart.

Now, if you remember last week, that was not the legacy handed down to him. His grandfather, King Manasseh, (in chapter 21), it says, “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out...”

His father, Amon, it was the same thing. (It says), “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father Manasseh had done.” He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.

But the Bible says that Josiah was intentional. He didn't just go along, do what was handed down to him. (It says) “He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the ways of his father David...”

(Not his actual father, but his ancestor.) “He walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or the left.” From a young age, he was committed to doing things God’s way.

At the end of his life, in chapter 23, it gives a summary. (It says), “Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did – with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength...”

The word I want to point out this morning is the word “turned.” It says he “turned” to the Lord. He turned to the Lord. You’ll see this in a number of ways as you read his story. He turned away from idols. He turned away from other gods. He turned away from the path his father and grandfather had been on, and he turned toward God.

I like the word “turned”, because it indicates an action. It captures a moment where he becomes more intentional. He had a choice. He could either continue on the path he’d been on or he could make a decision (and change) and go on a different path.

And so, when did that happen in Josiah’s life? When did he (consciously) make this decision? Take a look at verse 3 (chapter 22), It says, “In the eighteenth year of his reign, (and so Josiah is twenty-six/twenty-seven years old), he sent the secretary, Shaphan, to the temple of the Lord.” He’s going to have him go to the high priest (hire workers) and clean it out, repair it, restore it. It was falling apart.

And so, when they’re doing it (if you keep reading), and putting it back together, they stumble onto something. Verse 8, (it says), “Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, ‘I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord.’” I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord.

Now, just think about that, what’s happening in these verses. This is the Holy Scriptures. This is the Word of the Lord. This is the book where God has laid out for them what he wants, what’s he done, and how he’s called them to live. It was lost, discarded, thrown into a closet (or wherever), and now it’s found.

Verse ten says, “Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, ‘Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.’ (That’s an interesting phrase. “He’s given me a book,” like it was just another book.) They didn’t know. It says, “And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.”

And so, for the first eighteen years of his reign, King Josiah wanted things to be different, he was trying to set (the kingdom) on the right course, but he wasn’t sure what that meant. He was (quite possibly), as we said last week, following in the footsteps of his great grandfather, Hezekiah, who followed the Lord, but he still wasn’t sure.

But now he has found the scriptures. He’s found this book that lays it all out. This is what God wants. This is what God has done. And this is how God wants us to live. He now knows what needs to happen. And here’s where he’s going to find out if it’s only his good intentions (to follow God) or if he’s actually going to be intentional.

Verse eleven, (it says), “When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.” Immediately, he’s convicted. He becomes aware that the way things we’re being done is not the way God had intended. He sees that things are out of alignment with what God had planned for his people.

In verse thirteen, he connects the dots. He realizes that because they had not aligned themselves with the Word of the Lord that the things that were happening were happening. This is why nothing (in his kingdom) was being blessed.

He says, “Great is the Lord’s anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us.”

In other words, “Now it makes sense. This is exactly why (it feels like) things are out of alignment, because they are. We’ve throw away his book. We’ve tossed what he has to say to us in the trash. We’ve discarded it and it’s not working.” Now it makes sense.

You keep reading, he gathers together some of his leaders and tells them to go and find this woman, this prophetess in Jerusalem (who knows the Lord), to see if she might have a word from the Lord for them. And so they go and they find her and she does. She explains to them that because the nation had strayed so far away, particularly under King Manasseh, that God’s judgment will follow. There will be consequences to those actions. It’s going to happen.

She also sends this word to King Josiah, which is also a word from the Lord. (Verse nineteen), she says, “Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore

your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the Lord. Therefore I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I will bring on this place.”

You have turned towards me, God says. You are making these changes. You will live out the rest of your days in peace.

And so, the Bible points out a couple of ways in which Josiah responds when he is confronted with the Word of the Lord. And these are the same ways in which we need to be intentional if we’re going to close the gap between our good intentions and our actions.

The first thing God said (of Josiah), that he wants to see also in us, is that his heart was responsive. (His heart was responsive.) I love that image that his heart responds when it hears the Word of the Lord.

Here’s where it starts getting real. This whole study of Josiah’s life (when he was king), we’re not just studying it to learn about what he did (in his life) thousands of years before. We’re studying it to be challenged with how we’re going to respond (in our lives) today.

What’s going to happen (in us) when the Word of the Lord is in front of us? How are (we going to respond) when (we know) there’s something we need to change? When we’re convicted (by God’s Word), when God’s Word calls us out, what are we going to do? What kind of choice are we going to make?

Now, for many of us, myself included, we tend to respond to conviction with good intentions. We hear it (in a sermon) or read it (on line) and we say “I know. I know I need to change.” And then, because we have good intentions and we agree with what God is telling us, we feel better about what’s happening...and, as a result, we don’t always act on it. We don’t become intentional. But unless we become intentional (and do something), it doesn’t matter what we might feel.

I still remember the one couple who came to me in the first congregation I served up in Elk Grove. They made an appointment and wanted to talk, and so we set it up and they came in. I had no idea what they wanted to talk about.

The week prior I had preached on marriage and relationships and God’s design for our sexuality, and how it’s to be lived out only in that sacred bond. They came in and told me they were convicted (by the sermon) and they never knew. (They were new to the faith; new Christians.) They’d been living together for two years and were planning to get married, but they’d never heard what God had to say.

When they heard (for the first time) God’s design and intent and why it’s best that we make the marriage commitment first, before living together, they wanted to talk about setting a date and getting married. Now that they knew what God had said, they said they were committed to following the ways of God, so something had to change.

And so they made the change. They set a date. They moved apart. Three months later they were married. That was twenty-eight years ago, and they still are. Those were responsive hearts.

I could tell you many similar stories of people responding to God’s Word with more than just good intentions. The one man who had been coming to church for years, who was always in worship, a faithful giver, but who had never heard about tithing. Once he heard, he made the change (and the commitment) and he’s been tithing ever since.

The one woman who was a regular attender, who’d never connected the dots in her life that our worship is not something we do to become right with God, but something we do because God has already made us right in Jesus. Our worship is a response to what God has done. It’s an action (on our part) to praise and to say thanks and to renewed and filled up...and God commanded it. Once she made the connection, she never missed another Sunday. Now she knew.

That’s what happens in life. That’s when it becomes real. It’s when we come face-to-face with God’s Word and we’re convicted. When we hear (from God’s Word) that something needs to change.

This story of King Josiah and his life? This is a story about us. This is a story about how intentional are we going to be (you going to be) when you come face-to-face with God’s Word.

Until then, it’s only theory. Until then, it doesn’t matter what we intend. But once it happens (and we see it) and hear it (from God), that’s when the theoretical becomes real. That’s when we find out if we are simply good intentioned people, or if we will actually become intentional.

King Josiah knew things needed to change and he made the changes. His heart was responsive to what God said, and he responded in faith. That’s the first thing we find. He had a responsive heart.

The second thing we find is that he humbled himself before the Lord. He humbled himself before the Lord. This is one of things we find in the lives of all of the Old Testament kings. For many of those kings, they were humbled by God. They didn't humble themselves. They let their pride and their own desires win out, and they were humbled by God. In contrast, Josiah humbled himself before the Lord.

Now, again, we're not talking (in this series) about salvation, about how we get into heaven. We're talking about what happens in life in our response to God and how that plays out. The Bible says that "God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble."

That was our gospel reading today, the story of the Pharisee (who couldn't see beyond himself) to his own sin, and the Publican who had a clear understanding (and awareness) of his sin and was openly admitting it. This is one of those places where in humbling ourselves before God, we invite his grace and his blessing. When God needs to humble us, it plays out in a different way.

Now, living as we do in such a fast-paced, make-it-to-the-top, get-what-you-can out of life society, this whole idea of humbling ourselves doesn't come easy. It's a lot easier to deny that we need to change, than to actually make the changes that are needed. It's not easy to be humble.

What's harder and not so easy is to take the posture that puts you in opposition to God. If God says this, and you hear it and you know, and yet you still do that, then you're not avoiding being humbled. You're just waiting for it to come from God.

What's easier and what's better and what invites God's grace (in your life), when God's Word calls you out, is to admit it and to accept it and to humble yourself and do what it says.

Sometimes we deny it. Sometimes we blame someone else. Josiah could have blamed his father or his grandfather. I didn't create this mess. I inherited it. This isn't my fault. It's theirs.

Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. (It doesn't matter.) What matters is that this mess was now in front of him and he had a choice. And so he humbled himself and he came clean, and he didn't get caught in "the blame game," pretending it was someone else's fault. He humbled himself before the Lord. He acknowledged and accepted his part. And he made the change.

The final thing we find (in King Josiah's life) is that he tore his robes and wept. He tore his robes and he wept. This is the physical expression of a responsive and humbled heart.

Now, it's hard to know if Josiah had heard about that tradition, going way back to the book of Genesis, or if he learned about it from what was read to him from the book they had just found. He might even have learned about it from his father (or ancestor) King David.

Remember his story? After being confronted by God with just having had an affair and having the husband of the woman he slept with put to death, David was brought to his knees and driven to repentance. In Psalm 51 is where we find his heart and his repentance and his confession, along with what God wants to find in us.

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Josiah humbles himself before the Lord and confesses his sin, and God responds with a word of forgiveness and grace.

I still remember the phone call I received (years ago) from an elderly man whose life was coming to an end. He asked me to come and visit and so I did, and (as it turned) he wanted to confess.

It's funny how the gap between good intentions and action closes quickly when we realize we don't have much time left. This man knew he didn't have much time left. He was dying. It was only a matter of weeks, if not days.

He had already talked with his family and told them what was on his heart. He loved them, but he'd made a lot of mistakes and asked for their forgiveness. He cleaned up his finances, made sure things were in order. He reached out to an estranged son (who wasn't there) and had a conversation with him (for this first time) in many years. And now he wanted to make sure he was right with God.

I went to his house. We talked and we prayed and we read from the Bible. He knew he had not followed very well, even though he always intended that he would. He just needed to hear (one last time) that (in spite of himself) he was still loved. And so I shared that (in Jesus) he was, and that Christ had paid the price for his sin, and he wept, and in a few short weeks he was gone.

My friends, I don't know how all of this is hitting you today. We all have intentions that are good and things we put off. We all have changes we know we need to make and don't always act on what we know. My

prayer is that you wouldn't wait with (whatever it is) in your life until sometime (later on), worse case, until it's near the end; but that you'd close the gap between your intentions and what you need to do, and then trust that God will work in that and through that for your good and for his glory....Let's pray.

Father, we come to you today with thankful hearts for what you have done for us in Jesus, and with humble hearts knowing there are things in our lives that are not right. We ask that you would help us to move beyond good intentions, to actually taking steps (and actions) to align our lives with you. Help us to own it. Help us to acknowledge it. Help us to confess it and give it to you. Help that gap to close, that we might find peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.