

## **“Intentional Leading”**

I think one thing that is true for most of us here today, or at least we would (say it about ourselves) is that we are well-intentioned people. We have good intentions. We mean well. We want to do the right things, make the changes that are needed, to become the person we want to be.

What I've discovered, at least for myself, is that often times my good intentions serve as a substitute for my actually becoming intentional. In other words, because I have good intentions (and I mean well) and I know I'll eventually get to it, I let myself off the hook in actually doing something about it. I feel good enough about my intentions that I don't often take steps to back them up.

There's a psychological term for this, this type of action. It's called the intention – action gap. We've all experienced it in one form or another. It's one of the things true of the human experience in general.

For example, most of us can relate to the intention – action gap when it comes to money. We have the intention of being generous, the intention of saving and planning ahead, the intention of not going into debt. But there's this gap between our intentions and what we actually end up doing.

It's the same thing when it comes to diet and exercise. We have the intention of getting into shape, shedding a few pounds. We might even have the clothes already picked out for when it happens, but we don't always follow through on what we had planned.

I was listening to the radio, this past week, (on my way to work), there was an interesting segment talking about Net Flix and how they've changed their strategy on the things they offer. They use to ask their users what they wanted to watch, and then they'd create a page (for their customers) that would list the things they said they wanted.

People would tell them they wanted to watch a documentary or a national geographic or a history-related show, and so they would build this page where those things were all there and lined up. It didn't take long and they stopped doing that. What they found was that when it came to what people actually watched, what they did when they sat down, instead of watching the history-segment or the documentary, they'd fall back on some Adam Sandler movie from the 1990's, or a Napoleon Dynamite show, which isn't quite the same watching as a documentary on Napoleon.

Now, it wasn't (when the people were asked) that they were trying to be deceptive. It wasn't that they weren't being honest. They had every intention of watching those shows, but that's not what ended up actually happening.

And so there's this intention action gap, and it's the space where many of us end up living a good amount of our lives, having good intentions that we don't do much about. On this Father's Day weekend, I'm especially reminded of how easily that can happen to us as Dads.

Now, (in my case), my kids are all grown and things have changed, and they've all turned out well. I wouldn't change anything. At the same time, there's no doubt that there are things (looking back) that I had hoped and intended and (even planned) to do (when they were young) that didn't happen. Some of them didn't matter and (it wouldn't have mattered). Some of them never happened, and I wish (looking back) that they had.

Those longer hours (at work) that I wish I had spent (more of them) at home. Those times at home when I got so busy with little projects (around the house) that I wasn't watching as closely as I could have the little projects growing up in my own house.

I think I'm even more aware of it (this year) with my kids (having grown) and for the first time celebrating Father's Day as a grandfather. The years go by quickly, especially looking back, and as good as the intentions might have been, if there was no follow through, then it doesn't matter what was intended.

I doubt if I'm alone in this. We all have good intentions about the spiritual example we want to set, the time we spend in prayer with (and for) our spouses and our kids. Even if we're not married (and have a family), there are gaps (for all of us) in our (spiritual lives) where the intentions are good, but there's not much intentionality.

If you have your Bibles and want to follow along, go ahead and turn to the Old Testament, to our first lesson today from Second Kings. We're in chapter twenty-two. For the next three weeks, we're going to be looking at one of the Old Testament kings by the name of Josiah.

Now, there's quite a long list of kings in the Bible and we have differing amounts of detail about each one. Josiah is most often remembered as being the youngest of all the kings. He became king when he was only eight years old. But there's something about Josiah that makes him stand out (beyond his age), and that is the path that he chose. He followed God in his life. He followed God on purpose. It wasn't accidental living. It was intentional living.

There are a couple of verses I want us to notice (up front) that bookend Josiah's life as a king. The first from chapter 22, verse 2. (It says), "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the ways of his father David."

David wasn't his actual father. We'll look at his father's life in a moment. He was one of David's ancestors. In that way, David was his father. (It says), "He walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or the left." In other words, he stayed on task and (on course) and was intentional in following God.

The other verse that (bookends his life) is in chapter 23, verse 25. (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, in accordance with all the Law of Moses."

Now, as we look at Josiah's life and how he lived, like we need to do whenever we study the Bible, we're not just looking at King Josiah, but we're using his life to take a look at our own lives. The Bible (in its pictures and its stories) gives us a picture story of ourselves.

As we look at Josiah's life, I want you to be thinking about your own life and where there's this intention action gap where you need to become more intentional. There's something in your life that needs to change, but you just haven't done it. There's something you've been intending to do, but you haven't moved on it yet. It's on your radar. You want it to happen and you know it (needs to happen), but it hasn't happened. I want you to be thinking about wherever it is that you find this gap in your life.

Now, there are a lot of things that keep us from doing what we intend to do. One of them is as simple as the patterns we've learned and seen and that (over time) have become our own that are hard to break. You know how that works. The longer you do something (or see something) a certain way, the harder it is to change. And if you've seen something or learned something (or lived with something) that's not good, it's even harder.

It wasn't my experience growing up. I was blessed with two good parenting examples to follow. But that's not everyone's experience. Some of you have grown up with parents who were not such good examples and so in trying to set a good example, (yourself), you're doing it for the first time.

You want to be intentional. You want to do the right thing. But you never saw it, so you're not even sure what the right thing is. The course wasn't set for you, so you're trying to set your own course. You know the responsibility you have and you want to be intentional, but it's not clear which direction to take. The only example you were given (growing up) is not the one you want. That was true for Josiah.

Take a look at Josiah's background for just a moment. We're in chapters 22 and 23. Take a look at chapter 21. Here's where we find out about Josiah's father and grandfather.

Chapter 21, verse 2, this is about his grandfather, Manasseh, (it says) about his grandfather, "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites." (He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.)

Verse 6 says, "He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger."

And so King Manasseh does much that is evil during his reign and this is (the time) in which God promises much destruction for Israel. Because of Manasseh and his evil decisions, there will be some not so good things that will follow because of Manasseh.

It gets even worse. Verse 16, (it says), "Moreover, Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end – besides the sin that he caused Judah to commit, so that they did evil in the eyes of the Lord." This is the leadership example handed down to Josiah from his grandfather, Manasseh.

Then it's Josiah's father, Amon, who takes over after Manasseh is gone. He's twenty-two when he begins his reign. It turns out that his father is a lot like his grandfather.

Verse 20, (it says), “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done. He walked in all the ways of his father; he worshiped the idols his father had worshiped and bowed down to them. He forsook the Lord, the God of his fathers, and did not walk in the way of the Lord.” Both his father and his grandfather took the same path. His father reigned only two years, and then he was assassinated in the palace by some of the palace officials.

What I want us to see is that these were the leadership examples Josiah was given. His grandfather followed in a way that was not good, and his father followed in his own father’s footsteps. If we’re not careful and intentional, the default pattern (we’ll have), more often than not, will be the example we were given when we were growing up. That’s what tends to be the case for most of us.

Now, again, we can apply this (on this Father’s Day) to those of us who are fathers. It comes in a variety of ways. Maybe it was an aggression your father had, that he’d get angry too fast and too often, and you told yourself “that will never be me”, and then it happens, and you wonder where that came from. That’s where it came from.

Maybe it was in the form of passivity. Your father was there, but he was never really there. Watching TV or doing his own thing, but never really (and fully) engaged. Next thing you know, you’re doing the same with your own kids and you told yourself it would never happen, and it did. It’s not that you’re intentionally choosing that, as much as you’re defaulting to what you learned growing up.

That was true for Josiah. He had these examples, but he’s going to intentionally choose a different path, choose a different direction. And, again, fathers or not, you can apply this same principle in almost any area of life.

The legacy he had handed to him was one that was evil in the eyes of the Lord, but he intentionally chooses to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord. That didn’t happen by accident. He didn’t just stumble onto this “doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord.” It was intentional.

It’s interesting (in the Bible) what you find when you start digging. I started wondering what might have caused Josiah to choose a different path. The easy answer would be to say that he studied the scriptures and learned what God truly wanted. The trouble with that theory (and we’ll look at this more closely next week) is that the scriptures (during this time) had been lost. They were hidden (or buried) in the palace, and (over time) had been forgotten.

It wasn’t the scriptures that caused him to seek the Lord. It was (most likely) what he saw in the lives of those who had gone before him (his father and his grandfather) and he asked the question, “How did that work out for them?” What happened to them (in the path) they followed...and is that the path I want to follow to end up in the same place (in my life) as they ended up in theirs?

If the default is that we do the things we’ve learned growing up, then the natural follow-up is to ask what happened (and what will happen) if I do the same things? That’s (probably) what happened to Josiah. He had this moment where he started wondering if he was on the right path.

It’s what the Bible calls the law of sowing and reaping. If you sow a certain kind of seed, that’s what you’re going to reap. You plant corn and you’ll end up with corn. You plant wheat and don’t be surprised when wheat starts to grow.

The same is true in life. Evil leads to evil. Hardened hearts tend to turn people away. In the opposite way, kindness leads to more kindness. Love others and you might up being loved more in return.

I think Josiah must have had that kind of moment when he looked at the legacy he’d been given. Is that what I want for my life? If it led there (for them), is that what I want to happen for me? There must have been a moment where he realized that if things were going to change, he would have to be intentional.

The other thing (I think) might have happened, and we don’t know for sure, because the Bible doesn’t tell us. What it does tell us is that there was another example in Josiah’s life that went beyond his father and his grandfather.

Now, Josiah was eight when he became king, and there’s no way that an eight-year-old can rule a kingdom, know what to do. So there must have been some kind of education during those years that Josiah was given. And I have to imagine that (in his education) he was taught about the previous kings.

His father was killed when Josiah was eight. I’m sure he learned what kind of man his father was and that his father’s reign lasted only two years. Before that was his grandfather, Manasseh, who reigned for fifty-

five years, and he must have learned (more than he wanted) about his grandfather. But before his grandfather was his great grandfather, Hezekiah.

The Bible says that Hezekiah was a man of God. It says “He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.” It didn’t work for Josiah to follow his father or his grandfather, but it (turns out) that his great grandfather had actually left him a legacy. He never knew his great grandfather, but Hezekiah knew the Lord.

If you study Josiah’s life, it seems like it follows pretty closely Hezekiah’s life. Hezekiah rebuilt the temple. Josiah will rebuild the temple. Hezekiah cleared out the idols. Josiah’s going to clear out the idols. His great grandfather was known as a man of prayer. Josiah will become known as a man of prayer.

You start looking at the parallels and what happened, and it’s hard to conclude anything but that it was intentional. He seems to be following the path of his great grandfather. His great grandfather was the example he intentionally followed.

Now, we’re talking about fathers and grandfathers and great grandfathers, but this same lesson is there for all of us. It doesn’t matter if the example (in your life) was a father or a mother, or if that example was one that was good or not. What matters is what example (in your own life) are you going to follow? And if it’s not the default example you were given, then you need to be intentional in finding another one.

Maybe it was an uncle or a cousin who was faithful. Maybe it was a teacher or a coach who knew the Lord and lived the life. Maybe it’s one of your neighbors or one of your coworkers or classmates. Maybe it’s someone right here in this church.

You look at their life, the fields they have planted, and you say “That’s what I want for my life and in my fields.” It’s not going to happen by accident. Good intentions aren’t enough. It needs to become intentional in your life, if your life is going to produce the kind of crops you want.

The other thing I want to mention (before closing) is that there’s one other possibility in Josiah’s life that might have played a part in leading him to the Lord. Again, we don’t know (for sure), but it’s an interesting note.

As we’ve said, Josiah’s father was not a good example and his grandfather was even worse. But before his grandfather died, (in 2 Chronicles) it tells the story of what seems to be a death-bed conversion for Manasseh. Before he dies, (it says) he humbled himself before the Lord. He repented of the evil he had done. And he went back to the nation of Israel and told them to worship and to follow the One True God. Those were some of his last words.

There’s no way to know (for sure) if that had an impact on what happened to Josiah, but I do know that it is never too late to turn to the Lord, to ask for forgiveness for what’s happened in the past, and to come clean before your family (and those you love) with the things you wish you’d never done.

If that (in any way) rings a bell in your life, then maybe it’s time to ring that same bell in your life and make it happen. Nothing happens if it’s not intentional. Good intentions don’t get it done. If it’s not your default, then don’t expect things to just change on their own.

I love what it says about Josiah. It says “He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or the left.” He didn’t turn to the right or the left, but he led intentionally. He stayed focused on what was right.

I’ve learned that (same lesson) many times over the years, as a father and as a pastor (as a leader) and as a follower of Jesus. I’ll never be able to lead anyone to anywhere (or anything) that I’m not already going toward (or doing) in my own life. And I’m only fooling myself in thinking that if it didn’t work out for someone else (in their life), (not following Jesus), that (in my life) I’ll be the exception.

None of us can go back and relive the times we missed, and there’s nothing we can do to erase those times when our good intentions (won out) over actually being intentional. But God can erase those times and he did (and he has) and he will cover those mistakes, and he’s calling each of us (right now) to be more intentional in following him and in doing (and living) the things that count.

Let’s pray. Lord God, we thank you for the examples we have in the Bible of those who have made poor choices from which we can learn, as well as for those who chose in their lives to follow you and whose example is one we can choose to follow. We pray that you help us to move beyond simply having good intentions, and to become more intentional in the things in our lives we know need to change. Assure us that we are loved, remind us that we are eternally forgiven in Christ, and lead us to a point where we want nothing more than to live according to your will, made clear for us in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.