

“Intentional Living”

Today we're in the final week of a series dealing with areas in our lives where we need to be more intentional. Those places where we have good intentions, we know something needs to change, but we haven't been as intentional as we should.

We've been talking about this phenomenon psychologists have labeled as the intention – action gap. It's that gap between the things we intend to do (in our lives) and the actions we actually take.

The person we want to be, the kind of life we want to live, the priorities we know we need to set. Even spiritually when it comes to reading the Bible, our prayer life, our stewardship, going to church, the relationship we want to have with God. We know (there are places) we want (and need) to change, but we end up living much of our lives somewhere in this gap between our intentions and our actions.

I came across an interesting article by Kenneth Woodward (Newsweek magazine) who studied the results of different surveys and then compared the data in those surveys with the lives of the people surveyed. The title of the article was “Provocative new survey reveals a nation in which most claim to be religious but few take their faith seriously.”

The article opened in this way. (It said), “Sociologists have long puzzled over surveys that show that the United States is the most religious nation in the advanced industrial West. When asked, more than 90% profess a belief in God.”

This has been puzzling to sociologists because 90% of people in the United States profess a belief in God. But if you were take 100 people, 50 of them with a faith in God and 50 of them with little or no faith, and then try to determine, based upon their life and their lifestyle and the things they actually do, which group is which, you'd be hard pressed to figure out how they'd split.

Now, you could separate them based upon their intentions, what they said they valued and wanted in life, but not so clearly based upon their actions. And so, there's this disconnect where we have these intentions and values and things we know we need to do, but we're not always so intentional in following through.

In this series, we're looking at the life of King Josiah. In the Old Testament, we've been in 2 Kings, chapter 22. Today we're in chapter 23. Josiah was a king who was intentional. He was intentional with the opportunities God had given him. He was intentional in his leadership as a king. The Bible says “He didn't look to the right or to the left.” He stayed focused on what God had called him to do.

At the end of his life, we read that “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.” Neither before nor after was there a king who was as intentional as King Josiah. This is how he lived. This is what he did. And this is how our lives are to be marked and framed as followers of Jesus.

Last week we read about how, when he was confronted by the Word of the Lord, how he “tore his clothes and he wept” because he knew his life was not in alignment with what God had said. We talked about having a responsive heart and being humble and repenting in those areas we need to change.

We talked, also, about how it's (so easy) to respond to God's conviction with good intentions. Because we are convicted and we intend to make the changes, we (somehow) feel better about what's going on because we intend to change it. And so, because we intend to change it and (we feel better) as a result, we settle back into doing whatever it is (or was) without ever making the change. We left off last week with King Josiah asking people to pray for him because he wanted to be intentional and he wanted to know what to do next.

Here's what he does, in chapter 23, starting in verse 1, (it says), “Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the Lord with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.”

And so, here's what's happening. Josiah gathers all the people together. He reads from the Book of the Covenant, the Word of the Lord, and something happens. Something changes. The people commit themselves, in the reading of the Word, to what God had said, and in committing themselves to what God had said, they committed themselves to making some changes.

Now, this is basic to the faith, basic to being a follower of Jesus, and this is probably what you'd expect the preacher to tell you when you come to church, but there's something about reading the Word of God for ourselves that makes a difference. There's something about taking it in (by ourselves) that causes us to change. God works in us when we read his Word. He works through his Word to bring about the change in us we need.

Josiah had a profound respect for the Word of God. It had been lost (as we talked about last week) and buried in the temple. But then they found it, and when they found it, he didn't treat it as some outdated book that was no longer relevant; written long ago that had no meaning in their lives today.

He didn't read it and say, "This is all good, but the culture has changed and this no longer fits and works." He didn't look at the Bible through the lens of the world in which he lived, but he looked at the (world in which he lived) through the lens God had given, and he said, "This isn't working. We need to change. We need to align our lives with God's Word, and stop trying to align God's Word to our lives."

And so he honors this as their new standard. He takes the Word of the Lord seriously. He gives us (in his life) an example to follow in ours. He says (to the people), "You may not like this. You may not want to do this. It's going to require some change. Things are going to be different. But this is the new standard (we're going to follow) and we're going to honor it and we're going to keep it, and (in honoring it) and keeping it, we're going to trust that God will honor (and keep) his Word to us."

Here's what I want you to see in this example from Josiah, and this might well be what needs to happen in your life if you're going to close the gap between intentions and actions. Josiah goes public with his conviction and his commitment. He announces to the people that this is what is going to happen. This is what we're going to do.

I'd put that out as a challenge to some of you that maybe it's time to go public with what's happening in your life. Not just this personal response between you and God, but letting others (in your life) know that you've been convicted and that you're now committed.

For Josiah, as the king, his going public meant that he announced it to the nation. For you, maybe it's in your work place, letting some things be known, that you are convicted and you are committed. (I need to make some changes.)

Maybe it's in your own home. You say, "I am convicted and I am committed. We're going to do some things differently in our family.

Maybe it's with some of your friends. It's been going on too long and it's time to take a stand. "Hey, I'm convicted and I'm committed and there are some things that are going to change in me."

There's something powerful about going public with where you're at, with some of the changes you know you need to make. It changes things. It moves them to a new level.

It's the reason we have workout partners at the gym, so there's someone to push us. It's the reason people gather together in support groups like Weight Watchers and A.A., to offer support and challenge and accountability in those places where it's not easy.

Bottom line, we're not supposed to do this alone. We're not in this (faith walk with Jesus) by ourselves. We're here for each other. We're here to help and support each other.

You read through Josiah's story and the number one thing they were challenged with was idolatry. It was dealing with getting rid of the false gods.

The first of the Ten Commandments, it deals with this very thing. "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make any graven images to take my place." Josiah took this seriously. They had all these false gods that were all around the city, and he knew they had to be destroyed and taken down.

Now, when I first read this (part of the story), I thought (to myself) this is all good stuff. I'm glad (for them) they took those steps. They had all these idols, these false gods, and "Yes, they needed to make some changes. But what does that have to do (with me) and with us?"

You go through the story and Josiah goes to great lengths to rid the nation of their false gods. The articles made for Baal and Asherah, he burns them outside of the city and carries their ashes to Bethel. The pagan priests and all of the high places, he tears them down and they're destroyed. The male prostitutes and

their shrines, he does away with them. The Asherah pole (in the temple), after breaking it into pieces, he grinds what's left to dust and he scatters the dust in the cemetery. It's all gone. There's nothing left.

King Josiah goes to great lengths to rid the nation of these idols, these false gods. He destroys them. He obliterates them. He doesn't just set them aside and put them in some closet. He demolishes them. He does away with them. He makes sure there's nothing left and they're gone.

Now, again, we read that and we think, "Good for them. They had all these false gods, these idols and they needed to make the change. I'm glad they did. But what does that have to do (with my life) and with us?"

Let me simply say that this was the primary issue for Josiah (and for them), and it is the primary issue for us. It's what keeps us from closing the gap between having good intentions and being intentional.

We are constantly distracted by false gods. (We are.) Now, they look different. They may not be graven images. But everywhere we look, God has competition. There are things and there are people that are fighting for our focus and our attention, trying to become the priority in our lives, trying to unseat God from the throne of our hearts.

One of the Christian apologists, Os Guinness, puts it this way. He says, "Idolatry is the most discussed problem in the Bible and one of the most powerful spiritual and intellectual concepts in the believer's arsenal. Yet for Christians today, it's one of the least meaningful notions..."

If we're going to be intentional, it means dealing with these idols, these false gods, these graven images, these distractions that keep us from becoming the man or woman God has created us to be.

I don't what it is (for you) that stands in the way of actually doing what you know you want and need to do. If I asked (each of us) to stand up and talk about our prayer time (this past week) and how much time we intentionally devoted to God, it would be a mixed response, I'm sure.

If I asked about the last time you opened up your Bible and did some reading (outside of Sunday morning) and how often it happens, it would be the same thing. It's not that we don't want to and we don't intend to, (don't think it's important), it's just that we get distracted and pulled away and other things become the priority.

The time we spend on Facebook or texting or on our phones. I carry one of the most powerful and influential idols in our society (in my pocket) everywhere I go. On average, we check our phones 50 times a day. About 40% of (phone users) report feelings of loss or incompleteness if they go for more than an hour without their phone. About 30% say that their phone has come between them and their spouse, and they recognize that the screen time is affecting the intimacy they have in their marriage. If that's true in marriage, it's certainly going to be true spiritually.

We could go on (for a long time), talking about things that are all good things (and we all have them) – sports, and time with friends, and hobbies, and recreation, and just hangin' out – and they're all good, and we all have them (and do them), but they can (easily) get in the way and keep us from doing what we know needs to happen.

And so we have these good intentions, but there are these idols, these false gods that need to be dealt with. I'd encourage you to take a hard look, to take some action, to put up some guardrails. I'm going to do things more intentionally, so I'm not constantly looking to the left or to the right. If we don't do that, then we end up focusing on whatever's immediate, whatever's urgent.

In the time with the kids this morning (before this sermon), the whole accidental and intentional things in life that happen. They're opposites. There are things in (our lives) that fall into both camps.

On the one hand, accidents happen. (They do.) Things don't always go according to plan. On the other, if we don't plan and we're (not intentional), then we're not going to accidentally stumble onto what we need.

I could be wrong, but I think far too many people approach life in that way, without even knowing it. You hear it all the time in the things they say. "Accidents happen...It is what it is...We're only human...I can't do everything at once." Now, there's some truth in all of those statements, and every one of us has made them, in one form or another, and there's no way (in life) we can avoid them.

Accidents do happen. (We all know it.) Sometimes it is what it is and we can't change it. (We see it every day.) And we are only human and we cannot do everything at once. It's all true. (There's no question.) It's also true that it's easy to fall into the mindset that allows those statements and ways of (coming at) and seeing life to become excuses for not paying attention to the things in our lives that need attention.

You don't accidentally start reading your Bible. You don't accidentally begin setting aside time for prayer. You don't accidentally repair a broken relationship or offer (or receive) forgiveness for something that's been done. You don't end up in church (each week) accidentally and (by accident) starting trusting and learning from and falling in love with Jesus. It doesn't just happen.

My prayer in this series is that we wouldn't just come at life and go through life and live life accidentally, but that we would become a church (and a people) with responsive hearts, who commit ourselves to following God's Word, and who live with more than just good intentions; that we become intentional. Let's pray.

Father, we need your help in all of this as we think about the changes that need to happen and the struggles we have in living as we should. We know that we're loved and we're saved (in Jesus) and there's nothing we need to do to add to what he has done for us on the cross. We also know that we've called to follow him and that life makes the most sense and has the most meaning when we do. Help us to be more intentional in what we do, finding time and making time and setting aside time to spend with you, and allowing you (through your Spirit), and in and through your Word to change us and to mold us and to form us into the people you created us to be. In Jesus' name. Amen.