

“Changed Lives”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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**Text: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”
(Romans 8:1)**

This past week I had the opportunity to see the movie “Invictus,” which stars Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela, the President of South Africa, and Matt Damon, as Francois Pienaar, the captain of the South African Rugby team, which won the World Cup Championship in 1995. The movie, which was filmed in South Africa, chronicles the years after Nelson Mandela was released from prison.

The movie is impressive on a number of levels. It tells the story of a Rugby team that won the World Cup Championship. But it is more than that. It is the story about a nation struggling to overcome years of Apartheid and the racial tensions present when Mandela was elected the first black President of that country.

It is also a story about the power of forgiveness. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years in a Robben Island prison. After his release he reached out to the white Afrikaners, not in anger or revenge, but in a sincere desire to work for the good of all of South Africa.

I.

In his letter to the church at Rome the Apostle Paul writes, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” In this famous chapter Paul sets up a number of contrasts to explain the Christian life. For Paul there are certain dichotomies that are central to his understanding of the Gospel: law versus gospel, Spirit versus flesh. Those who live by the Jewish law live to sin and death. Those who live by the Spirit of Christ live in freedom from the power of sin and death.

Central to Paul’s argument is the notion that those who follow Christ are called to a new life. On another occasion he writes, “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation.”

There is nothing more important for many people today than the need for change in their lives. Many people are struggling within marriages and families. There are those who struggle with addiction and forces that have great power over them. Many people find themselves in a vocational crisis. Some are without a job. Some have a job that offers money but little meaning.

II.

Certainly this is real in the New Testament. It was vivid to the Apostle Paul. “The good which I would do,” he wrote, “I do not do; but the evil that I do not want to do, that I practice. I delight in the law of God in the inward man; but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am.”

It would be hard to find a more universal statement of the human dilemma than that. How many of us struggle with this? Each year we make New Year’s resolutions, only to find that often within a few weeks the resolve we once had begins to slip and old habits and patterns strangely reemerge.

But Paul moves from Romans, chapter 7, into Romans 8 with this remarkable assertion. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. It is here that this human need is met with a saving message. To be sure, none of us ought to be the way we are. That is the bad news. The good news is this. None of us need stay the way we are.

III.

Certainly the notion of changed lives is consistent with the ministry of Jesus. He found Palestine, like the rest of the world, full of unpromising people – a woman of Samaria, a Prodigal son, a dishonest public servant like Zaccheus, fishermen like Peter, James and John, getting nowhere in their lives – and he left them changed so that one would hardly recognize them.

Moreover, Jesus always took it for granted that such a change was so essential a part of human living that he expected it. Contrast that to the way most of us size up people. We make judgments about them that are slow to change.

For example, had you lived in London a number of years ago, you might have seen a young lawyer from India, smartly dressed, playing the social scene with success and charm, taking dance lessons and violin lessons. What you could not have guessed was that this bright, well-dressed young lawyer was named Mahatma Gandhi and that one day this toothless, half-naked ascetic living on goat’s milk would hold the spiritual destiny of India in his hands, almost single-handedly forcing the British Empire to end its colonial rule of India.

And yet, that is what happened. Moreover, I don’t think this would have surprised Jesus. I think he would say that is precisely the kind of thing that occurs in personality.

Moreover, this kind of change is something we find throughout the Old and New Testament. Jacob, the deceitful young man who tricked his father Isaac and his brother Esau out of birthright and blessing becomes Israel, the father of a nation. Simon, who vacillated on more occasions than

one could count becomes Peter, the rock on which the church was built. Saul, the bloody persecutor of the Christians, becomes on the road to Damascus, Paul, the greatest spokesman of the church in the Roman Empire.

IV.

But, it is not only the fact that Jesus changed lives, but also significant is the way that Jesus accomplished this. He did not so much impose a new life upon the people he met, as much as he discovered something that was in them, which they had not know was present in their lives.

That is true with many of the people with whom he came into contact. Zaccheus was a tax collector whom had defrauded many people. Jesus came into his house and had dinner with him. After they had eaten Zaccheus said to those around him, "Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." (Luke 19: 1-10) Jesus said, "Today, salvation has come into this house."

The same was true with a woman taken in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11). According to Jewish law the punishment for this was death by stoning. But Jesus confronting her accusers by saying "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." When there was no one left with her except Jesus, he said to her, "Has no one condemned you?" and she said, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more."

Today, there is a great deal of interest in what are sometimes referred to as "sins of the flesh." It is hard to watch television without coming across news stories of public figures who have been involved in sexual betrayals.

Now, these are not unimportant. But one of the characteristics of Jesus was the way that he emphasized "sins of the spirit." Jesus understood the power of hypocrisy, greed, envy and lying. He knew that these things also do a great deal of damage.

That is why there is something intimate and personal in what I am saying. How many of us have seen the havoc that a bad temper can wreak on a family? What about the self-pity that overwhelms some people that not only makes them miserable but those around them as well?

V.

When the New Testament speaks of forgiveness or "changed lives," it also inevitably points us to the cross of Jesus Christ. The New Testament speaks of the death of Christ in a number of ways. It speaks of the death of Christ as a ransom for our sins. In another context it speaks of Christ's death as a victory over sin. It also speaks of Jesus' death as substitutionary atonement for us.

All of these ways of speaking of the death of Christ have one thing in common. They all recognize that when there is a wrong doing, someone has to pay the price. Something like this happens in human relationships as well, when one person forgives another. Whenever there is true forgiveness, there is always the suffering of atonement, which accepts the wrongdoing and bears the guilt on the part of the forgiver, and the suffering of repentance on the part of those who receive

forgiveness. The death of Jesus Christ belongs to the very being of God, and to receive God's forgiveness calls forth the suffering of repentance.

Paul Tillich once observed that "sin" and "grace" are two of the most important words that we possess as Christians. For Tillich sin was "estrangement" or "alienation." For him sin was more a condition than an act. It was the separation we experience from God, from one another, and from ourselves.

But if sin is our sin of alienation and estrangement, then "grace" is God's love for us in Jesus Christ that wipes away the past and offers each of changed lives. In his letter to the church at Rome the Apostle Paul writes, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." I think Paul wrote these words not to be sentimental or even to suggest that all things have a happy ending.

There are some things that do not have a happy ending.

Rather, I think he wrote these words because in the most desperate moment of his life on that road to Damascus, when he was most estranged from God, he found himself accepted in spite of being rejected.

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we are estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, or our lack of direction becomes intolerable to us. It strikes us when year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage."

It is during these times that God's grace becomes real to us. It is a voice that reminds us that we are loved by God precisely at those points we are most unlovable. We are transformed by something that is greater than our sin. We may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed.

In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement.

"Sin" and "grace" are strange words; but they are not strange things. We find them whenever we look deeply into our own lives and long for real change.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Certainly that is a word that all of us desperately long to hear.

May God's grace abound in all our lives and may we find that love and joy that God so desperately longs to give us.

Amen!