

Great mistakes and even greater grace

Sermon for Sunday, July 29, 2007
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: James 3:2; Proverbs 28:13; Ephesians 2:5, 8

Today is the last Sunday I'll be here to lead worship at Wesley Church. For the month of August, we'll have joint worship services at Friendship Church, and after that I'll be gone. It's been a wonderful time, these sixteen years I've been with you, to worship and work, to love and be loved, to be part of the Body of Christ with you. I thank you for the blessing you've given in my life, and in our family.

When I look back over the years, I have many happy memories. Worshipping God will always be the highlight. The dramas get across the point in a memorable way. We've had a variety of musical styles. I remember telling a joke one time about having a study group to read the manual for my new Japanese car, and someone — I forget who — was laughing so hard she fell out of her seat. Our occasional choir brought the glory of music alive on special times. We've shared the sacrament of communion, the mystery of Jesus still present among us. We've had baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. I remember Bob Locke's funeral when we nervously watched the balcony fill and hoped it would hold the weight. The Variety Shows, the suppers, the fun days at the Loughs, the pot-luck suppers, the Sunday School special events — all these and more are part of the church family coming together to share our talents and enrich the community.

There are also things which I cringe to recall. Forgetting people's names. Remembering the wrong name! Forgetting a promise to do something for someone. Committing myself to being in two places at the same time. Frittering away time when I'm supposed to be writing a sermon, by instead allowing myself to be distracted by other things. Not taking time in the morning for Bible reading and prayer, consecrating myself and the day to God.

1) We all make mistakes

I could go on. I trust you get the idea. There have been good things happen. And there have been things which were not good. Here's a question for you: *Have you ever done things which you wish you could do over again?* It may be something you said or did, or something you did not say or do.

We all make mistakes. That's a normal part of life. But what about when we make the big one, one that years

later we vividly remember and it still makes us shudder? What do we do with the really bad mistakes? Extreme sports are very popular now. I'm talking about extreme stupidity. Is there life after that?

For some people, the answer is literally "No." Some of the corporate executives caught in recent years for their corruption and stealing from the company, unable to face the public humiliation and the likelihood of years in prison, have committed suicide. They left their families to cope alone with the crisis they left behind. You don't solve a mistake by making an even bigger one. That's not a solution.

In the Bible, the 3rd chapter of the letter of James is about controlling our tongue, that ever-so-dangerous organ in our bodies. But to introduce that chapter, verse 2 makes this simple statement:

James 3:2, New Living Translation:
We all make many mistakes.

It's the plain truth: we make mistakes. This isn't to downplay the seriousness of those mistakes. Some are simple errors of judgement. Others are deliberate sin. In all cases, we have to pay the consequences for our actions. Sometimes, other people are suffering the consequences of our actions as well.

2) The response: Accept responsibility

Proverbs 28:13, Today's English Version:
You will never succeed in life if you try to hide your sins. Confess them and give them up; then God will show mercy to you.

The first thing to do is to accept responsibility for our actions. Here are a couple of examples.

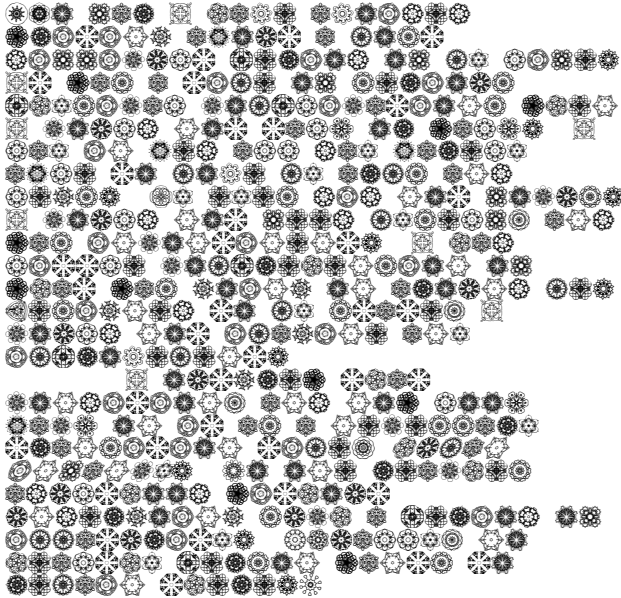
One person wrote: "After the accident, I told the police officer I thought the driver of the other vehicle was drunk. He told me the other vehicle was a cow."

James Samuel Steward was in jail in Gouburn, Australia. Someone smuggled methadone into the prison for him, and he overdosed on it, resulting in severe brain damage. His parents suit the government on his behalf (because he was unable), claiming that it is the government's fault that their son got tempted, in that it did not smuggle-proof the jail. They asked for \$2.7 million in damages.

Some people just refuse to accept responsibility for their actions. All their problems are caused by others.

Philip Yancey, a famous Christian writer who has authored a number of books and written hundreds of monthly columns in *Christianity Today* magazine, in his

recent book *Reaching for the Invisible God* revealed a part of his life which until then he had never mentioned publicly.



People who cannot admit they made a mistake are still emotional infants. Something happened in their social development, and they have never matured. Friends, if you've done something wrong, and you're hiding it, it's time to grow up. If you've made a mistake, the best approach is to be honest and admit it: "I was wrong. I'm sorry for the trouble and pain I have caused." Sooner or later the truth will always come out. It is far better to tell the truth than to be exposed as a fraud as well as causing the original problem.

Part of that responsibility may be paying back people for the loss they incurred. I have met people who, every month for the rest of their lives, have to send a cheque to someone in payment for the damages of something they caused. They don't complain; they admit their guilt. The experience has taught them humility, and that is never a bad thing.

3) Receive grace (forgiveness, mercy, healing)

One of the messages throughout the entire Bible is that our mistakes, our sins, our failures do not need to be the end. We can make great mistakes, but God's grace is even greater.

Grace is when God takes off of us the heavy load of sin, and wipes our lives clean. We can start over. Some people may never forgive; they love to nurse their bitterness, they wallow in misery. There is not much you can do about that. But God is not like that. God is always ready, even eager, to forgive.

Let's be clear: to forgive does not mean, "Oh, that was nothing. It's not important." Not at all. Forgiveness means, "We will not allow this thing to forever be a curse in your life. It is lifted from you. You are free to live again."

Ephesians 2:5, 8, New Century Version:

Though we were spiritually dead because of the things we did against God, he gave us new life with Christ. You have been saved by God's grace...

You did not save yourselves; it was a gift from God. It was not the result of your own efforts, so you cannot brag about it.

Have someone stand up with their arms outstretched.

Place a few books on one hand. How does that feel? ("A little weight, not bad.") That would be like telling a lie, taking something that belongs to someone else, pretending you can't hear when someone needs help. We think these are "little" sins, that don't really matter. We might even get used to it, and not even be aware that there's a problem.

But watch. Those few books were for a lie you told. Here are a few more for another time you lied. *Add a couple more.* Here are some more for taking something that belongs to someone else. *Add more each time.* And here are some more for ignoring someone in need.

How does it feel now? ("Heavy! I can't hold it much longer!")

Do you want some help? ("Yes!")

Jesus came to take away the burden of our sins. He lifts them off of us, and takes the burden on himself. *Take the books off, and carry them yourself.*

That's what grace feels like. It feels wonderful!

4) Pass grace on to others

Once you have experienced God's grace — you know you are loved and accepted just as you are, even though you are far from what you should be — you can pass this grace on to others.

Be ready to forgive others, just as God has forgiven you. I didn't make this up. Jesus taught this; it's even in the Lord's Prayer.