

Sermon – Sunday August 22, 2021

Give it the ol' college try.

-or-

I don't hate you for failing; I love you for trying.

Intro

Good morning, Grace Community Church. Morning, afternoon, evening, I guess it doesn't matter, eh? You could be watching this at any time. That's one of the nice things about these recorded sermons. For those that don't know me, I'm Zac Fairchild. And for those of you that do, I'm sorry. I am a member here and have been attending Grace for literally my entire life. I admit, I didn't really have a choice in the matter at first because I'm John Fairchild's son, but after I grew up and gained my independence I chose to keep coming. I love this church and community and I'm very happy that I get to share my ramblings with you this morning.

I've titled this sermon "Give it the ol' college try." Calvin and Hobbes is my favourite comic. I grew up reading it over and over and over, and there's a strip (published on June 28, 1995) where Calvin asks his dad what this saying (my sermon title) means. Calvin's dad replies with, "It means you join your friends, get some cheap beer, order a pizza, and forget about tomorrow." Calvin's mom then interjects telling them both that that is not the saying's meaning to which Calvin's dad responds, "Where did *you* go to college?"

The actual accepted meaning of the phrase is "to use one's very best effort" or "to try very hard." Just to clarify, I'm going with the true definition of this phrase for this sermon, not Calvin's dad's definition. You know, I could probably just stop right there and leave the sermon at that. Give it the ol' college try. Use your very best effort. It can and should be applied to pretty much every situation that we're in. Are you a parent and trying to figure out how much effort you need to put into raising your kids? Do your very best. Are you a student studying for an exam and wondering how much you should do? Do your very best. Are you an athlete training for a competition and deciding how much you should put into that training? Do your very best. Are you a Christian and wondering how much you should work to not sin and instead do God's will? Do your very best.

What God Requires

Let me be clear: God demands perfection from us. Not sinning and being holy is always the goal. Peter puts it plainly in 1 Peter 1:15-16: "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."" Jesus says it earlier on too in Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Pretty black and white, eh? In fact, you'll notice that Jesus most certainly does not simply say what I've already told you. He says that we should be perfect; he doesn't say that we should settle for just trying our best. "So, Zac," you are probably wondering. "Why the discrepancy? Why are you telling us one thing even though Jesus and Peter tell us another?" Well,

that's a fair point. Okay then, I'll say it too. Be perfect. Be holy just as God is holy and just how Jesus was holy when he was here on Earth. After saying that, I'll ask you a question: can you? Alright, it's a rhetorical question. We all know that the answer is "no." None of us, as fallen humans, can achieve perfection. Paul puts it rather succinctly in the famous verse Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,".

God, being holy and just, requires us to be sinless to enter Heaven and be in His presence for eternity, so that's a problem for us. Here's another tricky bit. There is nothing that we can do to become holy. There is no number of good deeds that we can complete to wipe our sin away. On our own, we're stuck. Thank God that we aren't on our own though. He loves us so much that he went out of His way (and "out of His way is *quite* the understatement) to offer us a perfect solution. He sent His son down to Earth to die on the cross for our sins. He offers this washing of sins by His son's death as a gift to us, and although there isn't any good work that we can do to get us into Heaven, if we simply accept His gift then our failures are dealt with once and for all. A deep dive into all this would require another sermon, but suffice it to say that God fixed our mistakes because He loves us and He knows that we cannot fix our own mistakes.

If you're following along here, you may have another question: "If there's nothing that we can do to achieve eternal life with God and He's just giving it away "for free", then why even bother trying to do good and be sinless anyways?" Aha now we've come to the question that started my whole thought process for this sermon. Some of you might scoff at this question and just brush it off without much thought, but it's an actual question that a lot of people have. In fact, there are groups of people who live their lives completely as they want with total reckless abandon because they believe that God has already forgiven every sin that they will ever commit so it doesn't matter how many more they perform. How do we answer this question if someone living like this asks us? It won't do anyone any good to say, "that's an absurd question; we're obviously just supposed to be good as Christians."

As I've been thinking about this question, I've come up with a few reasons that I want to share.

Reasons to Try

Reason 1: God commands us to be sinless. As noted before, Jesus tells us to be perfect, and Peter reinforces this thought even after Jesus has ascended back up to Heaven and had paid the price for our sins. This reason alone is enough if you really think about it. Why should we try to be sinless? Because God, the all-powerful creator and ruler of the universe, said so, that's why.

Paul, speaking in a letter to the Colossians, reinforces this idea and the gives it some gravitas in Colossians 3:5-6: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming." He says that we should "put to death" our sinful ways or destroy them so that they can no longer act upon our lives.

Reason 2: Doing God's will is an act of worship. Romans 12:1 has Paul saying, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship." The ultimate goal in all of our existence is to give God glory. We can do this directly by worshipping Him, and we're told that when we live our lives for God and obey His will then we are worshipping Him.

Reason 3: How we live is a witness to others. You've probably heard the phrase "there's no such thing as bad publicity" but that's not necessarily true outside of a worldly view. How we live and what we choose to do or not do can both impact what others choose to do or not do and shape their view of Christianity and God. You've seen this happen and continue to take place in our world today as some churches or individuals who identify as Christians have openly portrayed hate and judgement and condemnation to other people or groups of people. It's sickening and so backwards from what God commands us to do. Society sees this and it shapes their viewpoint. You may have heard this quote attributed to Gandhi: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." It's very, very hard to convince people of something when they don't think that you are convinced yourself.

Having said that, however, God can still use everything for good. Romans 8:28 says "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." He can use situations that may seem bad to us and use them for our good, and He can certainly also use situations that we've blown and turn them around for His glory. He even lets us help with that sometimes. Repentance and humility go a long way here.

Paul also puts another little spin on this witness piece when he says in Titus 2:7a "In everything set them an example by doing what is good." People also learn from other people and are good at copying. I have a three-year-old daughter and a ten-month-old daughter who both validate that statement quite well. Copying daddy is always a fun game. And you know what's interesting? Somehow, they instinctively know that copying bad behaviour is more enjoyable... So I have to be rather careful and purposeful in setting a *good* example for them. Paul I'm certain saw this play out in people too and made sure to clarify that we should set an example how? *By doing what is good.*

[Why Don't We Always Do God's Will?](#)

In Luke 6:46, Jesus asks a question: "Why do you call me, "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say?" Sometimes when I'm reading a verse or passage from the Bible, I like to picture how a quote is being said, and here I wonder if Jesus was asking it rhetorically (maybe even with a hint of sarcasm). It almost seems like a silly question. If you value someone so highly that you call them Lord, you'd do what they say, right? Right? But again, maybe it's a question that we shouldn't just brush off so dismissively. Why don't we follow all the things that Jesus has said? I know that I don't all the time; why don't I? What reasons would I give to Jesus if He all of a sudden showed up in the flesh and asked me this question right now?

I could reply with "it's hard." Wow, is it ever difficult to be perfect. I am fallen and sinful and many of my default reactions are not what God wants. It takes effort and vigilance to watch for these reactions and then even more effort to not do what comes naturally and instead do what God asks of me. And I've already got so much in life that I'm expending effort on. I've already failed so many times that I just don't know if I can even do it.

Do you know what that response is? Honest, for sure, it is how I feel sometimes, but it is also a lie planted in us from Satan. He is sneaky and destructive and always looking for ways to get us into a negative feedback loop to just drain all the effort from us. Remember this because it's very important: for Satan, our apathy towards God and His will is just as good as us actively turning against Him. Stopping you dead in your tracks in your spiritual journey is just fine and dandy for Satan.

St. Augustine has a nice, compact quote that should give us a boost here: “Give what you command, and then command whatever you will.” Augustine is pointing out that whatever God is telling us to do, He will give us what we need to complete His will. He will be there to help us. We don’t have to do this alone. In fact, lots of the time He has already given you what you need and He then simply gives you the opportunity to fulfill His commands. How empowering is that? If you want an example of hyperbole here, think of Peter when Jesus told him to walk on water. And no, there were no loopholes here. This is liquid water that we’re talking about, not ice. Under any other circumstance, you could correctly assume that if you do this then you will sink into the lake. But here, Peter tried and even succeeded for a bit. Jesus gave him a supernatural ability. And when he faltered, Jesus didn’t leave him on his own. He rescued him. He’ll be there to help you too when He asks you to do something.

God Loves it When We Try

I also have a sneaking suspicion that when Peter actually tried to do as Jesus said and he tried to walk on the water, even though he didn’t fully succeed I think that Jesus was ecstatic that he tried. I wonder if when Jesus caught Peter and says to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” He was saying it with a smirk on His face and being a little cheeky while making His point. I wonder if He was holding back a huge smile and thinking proudly that Peter had tried and done his best even though his best had ultimately failed. Sure, He was making a point to Peter (which definitely applies to us too) that he can still do better in the faith department, but perhaps He was very pleased with the amount of effort and faith that this human displayed.

We are all made in God’s image, so I think it isn’t a stretch to draw a parallel here to how I feel as a father when my daughter tries to do something that I’ve taught her or instructed her and how God feels when we try to do as He commands us. I’m just going to say it: being a parent is tough, especially the parts when you tell your kids that they need to do something that they don’t want to do or vice versa. I try to explain why I’m asking certain things of my daughter and sometimes this does help. We brush our teeth so that they stay healthy and strong and don’t get ouchies. We put bandaids on cuts to keep them safe while our body repairs the wound. We don’t eat popsicles all the time because they are a special treat that would lose their fun and they might even upset your tummy if you eat too many. Often times though, I just get a disappointed “ooooohhhh...” when she doesn’t agree. It’s tricky but I want the best possible life for her and that doesn’t mean giving her everything that she wants. Then there are moments that warm my heart and make me one proud dad. When my older daughter says, “Hey Dad, watch this!” and then proceeds to show me a new trick that she’s learned or skill that she’s been practicing, or when she plays nicely and shares her toys with her younger sister, or when that younger sister stands up all on her own and happily and proudly looks over at me with a big smile on her face. When my kids simply *try* to do what I’ve asked them or to live out the values that I’ve tried to teach them or even when they try new activities and challenges in life, it fills me with joy. I don’t mind if they fail (in fact, a lot of the time I’m expecting it), but the fact that they have tried is so important to me. And I know that I can’t properly express this, but it truly is.

I believe that’s how God feels with us too. When a Christian, a “little Christ”, tries to do His will and when they try to live for Him, He is pleased. God is love; He loves us. Nothing brings Him more joy than being able to be with us. It may seem like an outlandish statement but He sent His son to die for our sins so that we could be with Him. He loves it when we pray and commune with Him, when we worship Him,

and when we do His will. Simply trying to do these things is a huge first step for us as humans and God knows it and appreciates it. It's true that He demands perfection, but He already made a way for us to be holy and be with Him, and He loves it when we give Him an honest effort to do as He asks us.

Don't forget to keep trying as well. Trying once is certainly good and God loves it, but continuing to try even when it is difficult to do so or if you fail is just as important. The perseverance involved here also goes a long way in showing our dedication to God and can help you to overcome obstacles too. Generally speaking, the more you value something, the more resources you put into it. Your time, your money, your attention, etc. are all limited resources that you have and you get to choose how you use them. I challenge you: don't let Paul be referring to you in Titus 1:16: "They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him." Put your effort towards God; He loves it because He loves you.

We've Got the "Why" and the "What" but What About the "How"

One thing that can be tricky is knowing *how* to follow God's will. It's easy to summarize it with Matthew 22:37-40: "Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." But what does this look like in real life? I read a book recently for a study called God Space and I took one major thing from it. I should try to see people how God sees them. I'll be honest, this is something that I struggle with. I often times will get angry or frustrated with others or even just dismiss them completely, even though I know that's not what God wants. I have to continually try to view everyone how God sees them. I ask God to help me with this and to give me the patience and effort to look for people's value according to Him. Remember, God unconditionally loves everyone on this planet and so I should be doing so too. This is an area that I have to put in a good amount of effort and continually try. I've found that asking God to help me in this way and even just keeping this thought close to the foreground for me has been very helpful.

Another important thing to help you follow God's will is knowing what it is. For this, you need to be communing with God. You probably know the most cliché IT tip: reboot your computer. It may be cliché, but it's the first thing that you're asked for a reason. It's amazing how often doing this fixes issues. Similarly, you will constantly hear that you should pray and read your Bible to strengthen your relationship with God. And this is repeated ad infinitum for a reason as well: it works. Talk to God. Listen to Him. Be open to Him and actively looking for what He has to show you. You'll be amazed at how much he speaks to you when you are listening for it.

Last tip: encourage one another. Positive feedback is so good for helping you to do difficult tasks. Be in fellowship with other believers and share your experiences, good or bad. Tell them what you're struggling with and what you've succeeded in. Encouragement and prayer for your brothers and sisters is hugely important. Join a small group if you haven't yet! I speak from experience that they are fantastic and hugely encouraging. Just try it and I think you'll agree.

Closing

To close, I want to share a quote from another favourite piece of entertainment of mine: The Simpsons. Honestly, there's some really insightful stuff in the first 8-9 seasons of this show, even one that perfectly

sums up my sermon. Homer, kind of sad and downtrodden, says to Marge, “You must hate me, Marge. Every time I try to help, I just fail miserably.” Marge replies by saying, “Oh, I don’t hate you for failing. I love you for trying!” I’m telling you, that’s exactly how God feels about us. He may demand perfection, but if we try and fail, He is infinitely more focused on the fact that we tried than on our failure. He loves us. He loves being with us. And He is overjoyed when we try for Him.

Prayer

Let’s pray. Lord, thank you for loving us. Thank you for not giving up on us. Thank you for creating a way, even though the cost for you was enormous, for us to be with you despite our own failings. Lord, I want to live for you, and even though I’m not perfect and I know that I’ll fail at points, I’m going to try to do your will. I’m going to honestly try. Please help me to do so. Grant me the ability to see people as you do so that I may love them as you do. Please help to keep my eyes and thoughts on you and your commands so that I am vigilant and able to recognize when I need to up my effort. Help me to love you and love my fellow humans as you do. And thank you that I know you’ll always be there to help me and give me what I need to do your will. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.