

What Would You Do With A Second Chance?

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Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

—*Matthew 18:22*

How many of us have, when experiencing the calamitous consequences of some foolish course of action, exclaimed, "If only I had a second chance, I would. . . ." Often Almighty God grants us second chances, third chances, fourth chances, etc., and we either put these priceless opportunities to good use, or hopelessly botch and squander them. We all stumble, we all make mistakes, and we all inevitably beg our Creator for yet another chance. God believes in second chances, but there are strings attached to these fleeting opportunities—namely repentance and change.

God's forbearance or patience toward our habitual sin and misconduct has predictable limits:

So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. (Romans 2:3-5, NIV)

Nevertheless, when we come to the end of our tether, reaping what we have sown, we feel compelled to say, "If only I had another chance, I would" Would we really?

"If Only . . ."

Stephen Crane in his short story, *The Open Boat*, makes this insightful observation:

It is, perhaps, plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws of his life and have them taste wickedly in his mind and wish for another chance. A distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him, then, in this new ignorance of the grave-edge, *and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and his words, and be better. . . .* (Emphasis added.)

In the 1978 film, *The End*, Burt Reynolds portrays a man with a terminal illness, who in desperation hires a homicidal maniac to kill him. When he discovers he does not have a terminal illness, he must artfully dodge his hired predator. In one scene, Reynolds's character bargains with God, "If you will spare my life, I will give you 90% of everything I earn. Has anybody ever promised that?"

When the danger of his assassination apparently diminishes, the bargain with God rapidly diminishes to 80%, 70%, 60%, 50%, 40%—down to nothing. When the assassin suddenly appears again,

Reynold's character renews the 90% pledge until the danger passes again. How typically human! Former Senator Walter Mondale's father, a Methodist minister, once remarked that the problem with deathbed repentances is that, when the patient recovers, he goes back to his old destructive habits.

I cannot say I am exempt from such behavior. Several years ago, after pushing my faithful lawnmower beyond its point of endurance—attempting to wean it from its rightful quota of oil—I realized it was complaining about the abuse. I opened the oil-fill, observing a column of smoke ascending from the interior. In remorseful panic, I started to fill the crankcase with oil. I then pulled on the starter cable only to find the motor had apparently locked up. "Oh no," I cried, "If only I had a second chance, I would. . . ."

The next day after taking the mower to a small-engine mechanic, I learned that I had not destroyed the engine as I feared. As the engine started and the manifold coughed out plumes of thick smoke, I was extremely grateful to hear the motor come back to life. But, unfortunately, my neglectful behavior continued, and I ended up with a parallel predicament about a year later.

I reflect on the thousands of second chances I have been given, only to revert to self-destructive behaviors:

» On my yearly visit to the dentist, the hygienist gives me a lecture on the proper method of flossing and brushing. When the cleaning exposes a cavity or perhaps the need for a crown—or worse yet, a root canal—I suddenly become insightful about what I should have been doing daily for the past year. "If only I had a second chance, I would. . . ."

» I have been repeatedly warned by my colleagues to back up my computer data on CDs or external storage. When I have on occasions lost data, I remorsefully and contritely exclaim, "If only I had a second chance, I would. . . ."

» Several times I have lifted weights on the bench-press without a spotter, exceeding (just a little) what I knew to be my capacity, only to have to extricate myself from my foolishness. "If only I had a second chance, I would. . . ."

My list of "if only" moans could go on at length, but the common denominator of all these incidents is that when we are given a second chance, we need to make sure that we do not squander the precious opportunity. We have to come to realize that we cause tomorrow's "if only" regrets by today's neglects.

Multiple Chances

Often second chances actually seem to reinforce destructive negative behavior as the Proverbs 19:19 reveals: "A man of great wrath will suffer punishment; for if you deliver [rescue] him, you will have to do it again."

Our Elder Brother Jesus Christ advocated giving people second chances, third chances, or more chances as He counseled us to learn to forgive:

Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22)

Scripture is replete with examples of individuals who, when given second chances, put those trusts and confidences to good use. It also shows poignant examples of individuals who squandered their opportunities. Sometimes, it takes several failed opportunities before the one given another chance actually develops the character to make good on the opportunity.

One of Jesus' disciples started to develop a reputation as a deserter, almost to the point that the apostle Paul initially considered him a lost cause. John Mark reveals the first embarrassing failure about himself, which occurred on the night Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Now a certain young man followed Him, having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young men laid hold of him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked" (Mark 14:51-52).

This pattern of desertion and shirking responsibility was repeated in the company of the apostle Paul: "Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John [Mark], departing from them, returned to Jerusalem" (Acts 13:13). The text gives us no reason for his abrupt departure.

Paul was so angry about this desertion that he sharply told Mark's cousin, the apostle Barnabas, that he did not want to keep this good-for-nothing deserter or traitor in his company one day longer:

But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. . . . (Acts 15:38-39)

Barnabas was willing to give his seemingly derelict cousin one more chance. A church of God minister used to say, "A friend is someone who, if we botch something up royally, does not think we've done a permanent job." Barnabas evidently believed his cousin could redeem himself. Fortunately, for Mark, this trust was well-placed.

Even the apostle Paul, many years later, put aside his former animosities and resentments when he realized that this "one more chance" provided by Barnabas brought about in Mark the genuine fruits of repentance:

» Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him). . . . (Colossians 4:10)

» Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. (II Timothy 4:11)

Historical Second Chances

A most notable scriptural example of someone begging for a second chance is King Hezekiah, whom God mercifully gave an additional 15 years of life:

In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, "Thus says the Lord: 'Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.'" Then he turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the Lord, saying, "Remember now, O Lord, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth

and with a loyal heart, and have done what is good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then it happened, before Isaiah had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. And I will add to your days fifteen years.'"" (II Kings 20:1-6)

Tragically, Hezekiah squandered his second chance when he foolishly let his pride in his possessions get the better of him, endangering his kingdom (as well as his relationship with God) by foolishly displaying his wealth to Babylonian envoys. Isaiah had to warn him that for his foolishness, his family and kingdom would be taken into captivity:

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord: 'Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,' says the Lord. 'And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'" (II Kings 20:16-18)

Hezekiah marred his second chance through foolish behavior.

Ironically, Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, began his reign as one of the most vile and evil kings, seducing Judah and Israel into idolatry. However, when he reaped what he had sown, he begged for and received from Almighty God a second chance:

Therefore the Lord brought upon [Judah] the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon. Now when he was in affliction, he implored the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God. . . . He took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord and in Jerusalem; and he cast them out of the city. He also repaired the altar of the Lord, sacrificed peace offerings and thank offerings on it, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel. (II Chronicles 33:11-13, 15-16)

As wicked as he had been, Manasseh made the most of his second chance, showing not only personal strength of character, but also leaving us a wonderful example of God's grace and mercy.

Changing the Outcome

God is willing and able to give us a second, a third, a fourth, and a fifth chance. We, then, have to consider whether we are going to bring forth the fruits of repentance. Before we rashly cry, "If only I had a second chance, I would . . .," we need to soberly reflect on the caveats that accompany these plaintive requests. Consider the warning Jesus gives in one of the fig-tree parables:

He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone

this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down." (Luke 13:6-9)

In a similar vein, the apostle Peter issues this stern warning to those who become rescued from their sins, yet plunge back into their former behaviors:

While they [false teachers] promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire." (II Peter 2:19-22)

The author of Hebrews, presumably Paul, gives a parallel warning about frivolously throwing away opportunities for repentance:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned. (Hebrews 6:4-8)

Probably the most fearful warning (appropriated by Jonathan Edwards in his sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*) is the sobering admonition in Hebrews 10:26-31 (NIV):

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Back in the early 1950s when the polio epidemic ravaged the nation, public service billboards, urging vaccines or inoculations, began to appear across the country with pictures of children in wheelchairs, crutches, and iron lungs with the bold caption: "Don't Press Your Luck." This warning applies in spades to our eternal life.

God's mercy and forbearance are obviously infinitely greater than our own, and we can rejoice in them. Nevertheless, when we ask for a second chance, we need to commit ourselves soberly to following through by truly repenting and changing the outcome to a positive, godly result. When we

cry out, "If I only had a second chance, . . .," make sure the sentence ends, ". . . I would *not squander it*!"