

LENT ONE

Sunday 5th March 2017

Genesis 2:15-3:21



Excuses, excuses!

Have you ever offered an excuse to cover up or to justify something you either overlooked or got wrong? I know I have.

Excuses are offered to defend ourselves when we are at fault. Excuses are given to provide explanations when we have caused offence. Excuses are concocted as a means of removing blame when we literally muck things up!

“To justify or defend oneself when at fault, to provide an explanation when one could cause offence, to try and remove the blame from” - these are just a few definitions of the word “excuse”.

I remember standing on stiflingly hot, cramped platform on the city rail network one evening when a voice came over the intercom apologizing for overcrowding on the system - the explanation: there were “too many passengers”.

This also reminds me of an episode of the TV comedy series “Yes Minister” when health department officials defend themselves by claiming things were running quite perfectly in a local hospital until it started to admit patients!

Excuses are designed to get us off the hook. Excuses are produced as a means of defending ourselves or even justifying what we really know is wrong. Just listen to these drivers who were involved in road incidents:

“I started to slow down but the traffic was more stationary than I thought.”

“Sorry, Officer, I know I was speeding, but I’m in a hurry. You see, I am trying to get to the petrol station before I run out of fuel.”

Jean Renoir, the famous French movie director, won appraisal for his film, The Rules of the Game. Released in 1939 just before the outbreak of World War Two, this classic focuses on high society as the rich and powerful sink into a kind of decadent, debauched moral quandry as the dark shadow of Nazism threatens the nation.

Recognizing such decadence and debauchery is always accompanied with an effort to rationalize or even justify. Jean Renoir goes on to claim “The truly terrible thing is that everybody has their reasons.”

And when we consider this, things aren’t all that different now. Just think about the latest scandals involving parliamentarians using tax-payers money to fund their own personal travel. Recall those scandals involving past state ministers doing deals and pocketing benefits from various major developments.

The art of making excuses - this is not an activity exclusive to the rich and powerful. Frank McCourt in his book Teacher Man records his experience teaching in a rough and tumble high school in New York. Over many years Frank collected notes received from students offering excuses either for their absence from class or for their inability to complete an assignment.

These notes were supposed to be from their parents but Frank McCourt soon realized many were forged. Such forgeries were, in Frank’s opinion, actually works of art. They were far superior to any other written work produced in class and here, Frank realized his students had a real flare for writing. Listen to some examples:

“Arnold doesn’t have his work today because he was getting off the train and door closed on his school bag. The train took it away.”

“Cynthia’s big brother got mad at her and threw her essay out the window”

“The stove caught fire and the fire brigade told us we had to vacate the house all night”

According to the Bible, some of the very first words spoken by man and woman were words of excuse. God asked Adam “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” Adam responds, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate.” And here we have it - humankind’s first excuse - the bloke blames the woman!

Then we read that God turned to Eve: “What is it you have done?” Eve replies, “the serpent ticked me, and I ate.” So, the woman blames the snake - and snakes have been despised and hated ever since!

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But, you see, Adam and Eve are not loners here. The Bible is actually full of excuses. God spoke to Moses as he stood before the burning bush. Here God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. And how does Moses respond - he exclaims “why me?” “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:11). Moses is indeed making excuses as he contradicts God by stating “for you see, Lord, I’m not the right person for the job”!

And, friends, the excuses go on. “I don’t have any authority” cries Moses. “The people won’t believe that you sent me”, “the people won’t listen or believe me”.

Then finally, Moses goes on to claim, “I have a bad stutter” - “I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10). Indeed, in all this rant, Moses is looking for a way out. He is begging God to please send someone else!

But you see, it’s not only Moses who makes excuses. As he comes down Mt Sinai with the Ten Commandments Moses is confronted with the community dancing around a statue of a golden calf. Aaron immediately offers an excuse by claiming the people are bent on evil. Moreover, they didn’t know what had become of Moses - they thought he had become lost or had abandoned them (see Exodus 32).

Jesus was also very much aware of excuses. In his Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14: 15-24) the host issues lots of invitations. However many turn the host down. “I’ve just bought some real estate and I must tend to it” says one guest. “I’ve just bought some new farm equipment - two oxen - and I want to take them out for a spin.” says another. Then a third guest explains - “I just got married and I will be on my honeymoon.”

The point Jesus makes here is that, not only do people make excuses, but in making such excuses they go on to miss out.

In other words, making excuses has consequences. In this parable people forfeit the greatest blessing of all which is an invitation to share in Kingdom of God.

Friends, excuses are destructive. Excuses refuse to actually deal with the truth. Excuses mean we miss out. Excuses mean we don’t get to experience what God intends for us. Excuses have no place in Christian life!

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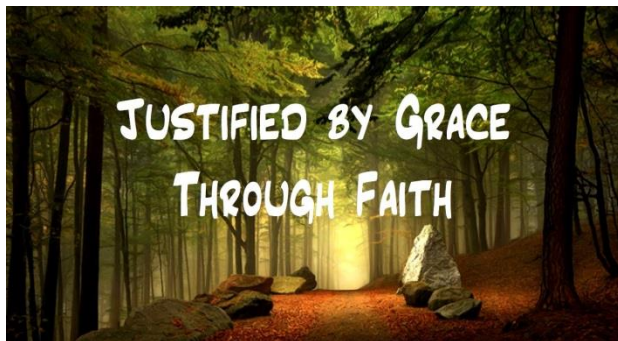
This may sound rather harsh. But you see, we don't have to make excuses. We don't have to justify ourselves. We don't have to create a defense.

Indeed, the scriptures tell us such a thing is pointless because, when it comes to justifying ourselves, when it becomes a matter of mounting a defense for what we have done or not done, the only one who can speak on our behalf is God.

Justifying and defending is God's business. Mounting a defense on our behalf is something God does. Getting oneself off the hook is nothing to do with us - and everything to do with God. Paul declares this in the words: "we are justified by grace through faith" (Ephesians 2:8).

Putting it another way, Paul says we are free to recognize we are not perfect people. We are free to admit we don't measure up. We are free to understand we don't have to make excuses or mount a defense.

And in doing so we are to simply believe and openly accept that God makes things right on our behalf. God justifies. God speaks and God acts on our behalf. In plain English, God gets us off the hook!



Friends, we are a people who no longer have to make excuses. Rather, we are a community who can admit we are wrong. And in doing we are able to celebrate the joy of being forgiven.

So, you see, God doesn't want excuses. God doesn't need excuses. God doesn't require an explanation or a defense. God just wants us to own up as God forgives!

Before you again begin making excuses, why not try making a confession? Before trying to make your own defense, why not try seeking forgiveness?

Before making an effort to rationalize that which mistaken and wrong, why not try turning it all over to the God who loves you?

And why not try refusing to accept excuses from others by just learning to forgive them too!

Adam and Eve made big mistakes. They usurped God's authority, they claimed absolute autonomy in a world that belonged to God, they breached conditions, crossed boundaries and subverted a trust gifted to them by God.

But perhaps the biggest sin of all was the way they tried to justify it all. Adam and Eve endeavored to explain it all way. Adam and Eve tried to rationalize their actions and mount a defense on their part. Adam and Eve made excuses!

And the consequences were horrific.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today we do not, indeed, we must not make excuses. For, we are “justified by grace through faith.”

Here God listens to the repentant sinner. God accepts those who admit their mistakes. God responds to our admissions of wrong-doing. And in doing so - we are forgiven, we are given another chance, we are with gifted with the abundance of God’s incredible grace.

Moreover, we no longer need to make excuses when relating to one another. We no longer need to justify our silly ways or defend our suborn assumptions.

Rather, as a people who are justified by grace through faith, let us learn to admit our failures to others, let us be willing to name those things we get wrong and let us openly express sorrow for everything we have overlooked or mistakingly done.

Today, on this first Sunday of Lent, let us throw those excuses out the window. Let us face one another with honesty. And let us approach God with an open heart.

Importantly, let us get down on our knees to confess and, in doing so, let us discover the wonder and the joy of being forgiven, an assurance that is ours in Christ Jesus!

Amen.



John Barr