



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

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When You Dream One Thing & Live Another

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6

Imagine a computer programming class. A young man and a young woman are facing each other working at computers. The computers, of course, sit back to back. A few minutes into the class, the young woman leaves the room; whereupon the young man reaches between their computers and switches the inputs for the keyboards. The young woman comes back and starts typing. Immediately gets a distressed look on her face. She calls the teacher over and explains that no matter what she types, nothing happens.

The teacher then tries with the same result. By this time the young man is hiding behind his monitor and quaking red-faced. He types, "Leave me alone!" The teacher and the young woman both jump back from the computer screen, silenced.

"What on earth???" the teacher blubbers. Then on the screen appears the message, "I said, leave me alone!"

The young woman gets really upset. "I didn't do anything to it, I swear!" she says.

It was all the young man could do to keep from laughing out loud. The conversation between the teacher, the student and the errant computer goes on for an incredible five minutes.

The computer: "Don't touch me!"

The young woman: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit your keys that hard."

Computer: "Who do you think you are anyway?!"

Finally, the young man can't contain himself any longer and falls out of his chair laughing. After they realize what he had done, the teacher and the young woman both turn beet red. Funny, the young man reports, he never got more than a C- in that class. Some people don't have a sense of humor.

This story reminds me of a line by comedian Steven Wright. Wright says: I have a switch in my apartment. It doesn't do anything. Every once in a while, I turn it on and off . . . One day I got a call. It was from a woman in France. She said, "Cut it out!"

Isn't the story of the switched computer keyboards like a lot of people's lives? You type in one thing, but something entirely different comes up on the screen. You type in "good family life" and instead you get bickering and strife. You type in "good job" and you end up getting laid off. . . You type in "good health" but the doctor tells you that on the X-ray she sees a spot, and your stomach ties in knots, and you feel as if the wind has been knocked out of you. So, what do you do when you've dreamed one thing but you find yourself living something else? You typed in success and you found something less. You typed in "hope" and you discovered despair.

The people of Israel knew about such unintended results. They typed in "the chosen people of God," but chosen for what? Much of their history was filled with pain, suffering and exile. Sometimes they probably wished God would choose someone else. Even as Jeremiah writes the beautiful words from our Old Testament lesson, the people are yearning to see their homeland restored.

In our Epistle, Paul is writing to the church at Ephesus. Early Christians knew what it was to type in one thing and to read something else entirely on the screen. What do you do when the result you are getting is not the result you had intended?

St. Paul gives us the answer in this passage from Ephesians. The ultimate answer to success in life, says St. Paul, boils down to two ingredients: IDENTITY and PURPOSE. St. Paul writes: "How we praise God, the Father of our Lord

Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every blessing in heaven because we belong to Christ. Long ago, even before he made the world, God chose us to be his very own, through what Christ would do for us; he decided then to make us holy in his eyes, without a single fault--we who stand before him covered with his love." (The Living Bible)

The operative words in this passage are "we belong to Christ" and "he decided then to make us holy in his eyes . . ." These words tell us who we are and they tell us what we are about. Sociologists tell us that every human being who ever lived has longed for these two characteristics, an identity and a purpose.

After all, our identity determines our attitudes and our actions. If a child is raised with a negative self-image, if he's told he's no good, then quite often that child will conform his actions and attitudes accordingly.

Psychologists tell us that we invariably, inevitably, move toward the strongest impression in our mind. For example, a law enforcement officer stops a lawbreaker on the side of the road. Now the officer has a decision: should he turn off the blue light flashing on the top of his car? Yes, he should. Research shows that he has seven times as good a chance of having his patrol car hit by a passing motorist if he leaves his flashing light on as he does if he turns the light off. There is something about that blue light that attracts us--as fearsome as it might be.

We move toward the strongest impression in our mind. This explains why many people fail in life. Without being aware of it, many people sabotage themselves. They think "success," but their subconscious tells them they are not worthy of that success. Thus, even though they have the intellect for success, the education for success, even great opportunities for success, they are drawn inevitably toward failure.

Consider, for example, a young athlete named Nancy Ormsby. Nancy's life would make you think she was born under a lucky star. A straight-A student in high school. Leader of her church's youth group. She set three world-records in track while still in high school, and her whole town set aside a day in her honor. A pre-med student in college. Success seemed to be Nancy's middle name. So the athletic world was shocked when, at the 1986 NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships, Nancy Ormsby suddenly broke away from the pack of runners, left the sports arena, and jumped off a forty-foot bridge. Nancy wasn't killed, but she was permanently paralyzed by the fall. Months later, Nancy was interviewed about that horrible day. She was the golden girl of track and field. Her life had seemed perfect. What had caused her to attempt suicide?

Nancy explained that she had felt herself falling behind the other runners, and she was suddenly afraid of losing. As she said, "I saw what was happening as failing God. I felt like I was failing my coach and my parents, and I thought there was something wrong with me." (3) On the outside Nancy Ormsby was perfection personified. But there was a flaw in her self-image--a flaw that nearly cost her her life, and did cost her her athletic ability. Nancy was deeply religious, but somehow she had missed the Gospel, and the Gospel is this: "How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every blessing in heaven because we belong to Christ. Long ago, even before he made the world, God chose us to be his very own, through what Christ would do for us; he decided then to make us holy in his eyes, without a single fault--we who stand before him covered with his love."

It is God who makes us holy. It is God who sees us without flaw. This is not a call to be perfect--quite the opposite. It is a call to accept God's unconditional grace--to recognize that God loves us just as we are, warts and all, and accepts us AS IF WE WERE PERFECT. We belong to Christ. We are God's own. We don't have to win any races or any trophies or any awards. We don't have to be Mom of the year, or salesman of the decade, or even all-round good-guy of the Century. God loves us just as we are. In God's eyes, says St. Paul, we are perfect.

Writer Chuck Swindoll notes that ordinary, common possessions can become extremely valuable, even priceless if they have been owned by someone who is powerful, wealthy, or famous. For example, he points out that Napoleon's toothbrush sold for \$21,000. Can you imagine paying thousands of dollars for someone's cruddy old toothbrush? Hitler's car sold for over \$150,000. Extraordinary prices have been paid for Winston Churchill's desk, a pipe owned by C.S. Lewis,

sheet music handwritten by Beethoven, a house once owned by Ernest Hemingway. At the Sotheby's auction of Jackie Kennedy Onassis's personal belongings, her fake pearls sold for \$211,500 and JFK's wood clubs went for \$772,500. Not because the items themselves are worthy, but because they once belonged to someone significant.

"Are you ready for a surprise?" Swindoll writes. "We fit that bill, too. Think of the value of something owned by God. What incredible worth that bestows upon us, what inexplicable dignity! We belong to Him." (4)

This passage tells us who we are. It gives us our identity. We belong to Christ. It also give us our purpose. We are "to be holy and blameless in love" according to one translation. HOLY refers to "set apart." We are set apart for God's special purpose.

William Marsten, a prominent psychologist, asked 3,000 people, "What have you to live for?" The results revealed that 94 percent responded by saying they had no definite purpose for their lives--94 percent!

You and I have a purpose. Those of us whom God chose "even before he made the world" know what we are about. We are God's own people—extending to others the kindness God has shown to us by living lives of love, acceptance, and forgiveness. The world should be a better place to live in because we are Christians. Even though we are not perfect people--God knows we are not perfect people--and even though we continually type one thing into life's computer and something else altogether different comes out--we never lose sight of one truth--we have been bought for an exorbitant price ...our lives, our happiness, our forgiveness, our salvation was purchased at a very great cost. We are people of exceedingly great value and worth because the Son of God gave his life for us. And in return God asks us to keep in mind that he has a heart for all people....ALL PEOPLE...the church is not an exclusive Country Club... God's love is available to all who are sick of the hassles and disappointments of day to day living ..And God want us to share his love with the world.

In life there are a lot of people who have lost a loved one or lost a job or lost a marriage or lost a pile of money or lost good health and who have not been able to find their way back from the chasm of despair. God would have us to know that no matter what lousy thing happens to God's children. God is always there for us just as you are there for your children ...extending them hope, bringing them encouragement, helping them to build new opportunities when they hit a rough patch in the road.. Yes, there is hope, even when we type in one thing and something else emerges. No matter what happens our identity or purpose as children of God is something we cannot lose.

We belong to God. God loves us just as we are. We don't have to achieve worldly greatness or even sainthood. Because of what Christ has done for us, God has set us apart to be a special people-- and there is nothing in this world that can take that away from us. Amen