

YOUR MOVE

When I was in the seventh grade, my best friend, Claude Jardon, introduced me to the game of chess. Chess is thought to be the oldest game known to man. Its origins are uncertain but it is mentioned in some of the most ancient documents that have ever been discovered. I quickly became fascinated with the game. I bought books about chess and devoured them. Among other things I learned that there are a googol of possible combinations in the first ten moves of a chess game. (A googol is ten to the one-hundredth power, or one followed by one hundred zeroes. It's also where the contemporary internet resource company got its name.) I got some of my friends interested and we spent many, many hours playing chess. We organized tournaments and even gambled on games (unbeknownst to our parents of course). A habit arose among us of saying "Your move" after we had completed our own move, and later on when we formed a chess club we called it "Your Move."

I think we Christians sometimes feel that it's "our move." God has made His move: he saved us from our sins. Now it's our move. How do we respond?

Well, first of all it is certainly true that it *is* God Who makes the first move in dealing with mankind. Our *Old Testament* lesson this morning from the *Book of Isaiah* makes that clear. God says: "*I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.'*" (*Isaiah 64:1*) Some folks think that the Bible is all about people who are seeking God. It isn't. The Bible is all about a God Who seeks people. We don't find God; God finds us. Abraham wasn't seeking God; he was worshipping a pagan god by the name of Nimrod when God found him. Moses was herding sheep in Midian along with his pagan wife and David was herding sheep in Bethlehem when God found them. Jeremiah was still a child when God found him. And after God came into this world in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ, He found Peter and Andrew and James and John while they were fishing and made them His disciples. The Good Shepherd is always seeking and finding His lost sheep; lost sheep don't find their own way back to the shepherd.

God always makes the first move. And what God seeks, God finds. If you are sitting here this morning with faith in your heart that Jesus Christ is your Savior, then God sought you out, found you, and made you part of His flock. Now it's your move.

So what IS your next move? Before answering that, let's first consider where you were when God found you. Then we can talk about where you can go next.

In today's Epistle lesson from the *Book of Galatians*, Paul reminds the members of the church at Galatia *what* and *where* they were before they heard the Gospel: "*Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.*" (*Galatians 3:23*) How does the law lock us up? Well, the law locks us up by making us its slaves—not by forcing us to obey it, but by doing the exact opposite: by provoking us to rebel against it. The law has the same effect as waving a red flag in front of a bull; it is to sin what gasoline is to fire. It never occurred to me to smoke a cigarette until one day in

the second grade when a man came to our class and gave us a lecture on the evils of smoking. I went home, filched a Phillip Morris out of my mother's purse and lit up. I did it because I had been told not to do it.

Anything that controls us is our jail keeper. And the law controls us by driving us to do the opposite of what it commands. There's a song in the musical *The Fantastiks* that goes, "Why do the kids put beans in their ears? No one can hear with beans in their ears! So why do the kids put beans in their ears? They do it 'cause you said 'No.'"

Now here's the surprise: this is exactly how God intended that things should work. Paul writes: "The law came in so that sin would increase." (Romans 5:20) God knew when He said, "Thou shalt not..." that we would respond by saying, "Oh yes I shall." The question is: why would God do something that caused us to sin? Paul answers that in the next verse of our Epistle lesson: "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." (Galatians 3:24) How does the law lead us to Christ? By showing us that by nature we are hopelessly lost in sin and headed for death. The law is like a garrote, a contraption of ropes that binds a noose around a man's throat to his arms and legs in such a way that when he struggles against his bonds, he tightens the noose around his throat. The more he struggles, the quicker he dies. In effect, he kills himself by his struggling. In the same way, the more you struggle with the commands of the law, the tighter they get. Your own struggling is what finally kills you by driving you to despair. "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." (Romans 3:20)

This seems like an enigma—a cruel hoax. God holds us responsible for something we can never accomplish. We are commanded to do what is good, but our rebellious natures drive us to do what is evil. Why would God do such a thing? Why would He order us to do something we can't possibly do and then threaten us with death and eternal misery when we fail?

Ahhh! God has placed us in this impossible situation so that we might come to realize just how helpless we are before the power of sin. So that we may learn through the futility of our struggling that if we would be free of the power of sin, we must be set free by One who is more powerful than we are. And that One is Christ, who came to set us free. As Paul has written: "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." (Romans 11:32) Now that Christ and faith have come, we no longer belong to Satan, our accuser and our jail keeper; we belong to Christ, our deliverer and our Savior. He paid the ransom, He bought us back and He sets us free.

"Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus..." (Galatians 3:25-26) Faith—created in our hearts by a loving God—is the key that unlocks the prison door and cuts us loose from the garrote of law and sin and death. Faith justifies us, makes us righteous in God's eyes. And what does that mean? It means that in spite of all our past sins and our continuing sins, God has declared that in His sight we are righteous and holy. And God's declaration creates a new reality for us, for when God says, "Let there be"...there is. In Luther's words, God has made a joyous exchange with us: he has taken our sins and given them to Christ, and he has taken Christ's righteousness and given it to us. We appear to God

as the perfect creatures he designed us to be, rather than the thankless rebels that we are.

So that is what we were and that is what we are. Prisoners set free. Sinners declared to be righteous. God has made us a holy people, clean and spotless in His sight. God has made His move and now he says to us: "Your move."

And what is our next move? Where do we go next? It seems to me that many Christians get confused at this point. We don't know what to do next: if we try to lead holier lives than we do we end up wrestling with the law again and doom ourselves to failure. On the other hand, if we ignore the law we run the risk of misusing God's grace as a license for sinning. So what do we do? What is our next move?

Well the answer is simply this: *our next move is to go where God takes us.* Our next move is to let God move us as we move a pawn or a knight in a chess game. Jesus said: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit..." (John 15:5)* Now a branch doesn't **decide** to bear fruit, it doesn't **struggle** to bear fruit; a branch bears fruit naturally **because it is attached to the vine.** It draws its life and its fruitfulness from the vine. And so it is with us. When Jesus was asked *"What are the works that God requires?"* He answered: *"The work of God is this: to believe in the One he has sent."* (John 6:28-29) Through the Psalmist, God says: *"Be still and know that I am God."* (Psalm 46:10) God will produce fruit out of his disciples simply by virtue of their relationship with Christ: He will work in and through them to produce fruit for His kingdom.

I've told this story before but I can't resist telling it again because it so perfectly illustrates the nature of a faith relationship with God. A man took his three-year old daughter with him to the grocery store. The parking lot was icy, so when they got out of the car he reached down to hold his little girl's hand as they walked across it. She said, *"Daddy, can I just hold onto your hand?"* "OK," he said. Soon they came to an ice patch and she lost her footing and let go of his hand and fell down. He picked her up and said, *"Now, I'll hold YOUR hand the rest of the way."* And the next time she slipped on a patch of ice, she didn't fall down, because her father was holding her up.

That's what faith is: not our holding onto God, but God holding onto us and leading us where He wants us to go. And as surely as He holds us up and keeps us from falling, He will make us fruitful as long as we abide in Him. He will make your next move for you, and it will be the perfect move.

Amen.

Galatians 3:19-25

¹⁹ Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. ²⁰ A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.

²¹ Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the

law. ²² But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

²³ Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

John 6:20-35

²⁰ But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid.” ²¹ Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

²² The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. ²³ Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

²⁶ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

²⁸ Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

²⁹ Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

³⁰ So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

³² Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴ “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.