

## Your Move

When I was in the seventh grade, my best friend introduced me to the game of chess.

Some say that chess is the oldest game known to man.

Its origins are uncertain, but it is mentioned in some of the oldest 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.

(For those of you who didn't know, a googol is the number one followed by one hundred zeroes).

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, and later on when we formed a chess club we called it "Your Move."

I think that that's the way we often feel as Christians.

God has made His move: he saved us from our sins. Now it's our move. What do we do next?

One thing is certain: God makes the first move in dealing with mankind.

Our *Old Testament* lesson this morning from the *Book of Isaiah* makes that clear. Speaking through the prophet, 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.'*"

People who aren't Christians frequently misunderstand this.

They assume that Christians are people who have sought God and found him.

But that couldn't be further from the truth.

It might apply to Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism or any number of pagan religions, but it does not apply to Christianity.

Christians aren't people who have sought God and found Him; they are people whom God has sought and found and saved.

He sought and found Abram in the land of Haran.

He sought and found Moses on a mountain in Midian and David in Bethlehem.

He found Isaiah and Jeremiah in His own temple while they were praying.

And when God took on human flesh and blood he continued to seek and find His disciples.

He found James and John tending their fishing boat and invited them to follow him.

He found Paul on the road to Damascus.

The Shepherd is always looking for lost sheep to carry back to His flock.

They don't find their own way back—He finds them and brings them back.

God always makes the first move.

If you are sitting here this morning with faith in your heart that Jesus Christ is your Savior, it is because God sought you and found you, and made you part of His flock.

Now it's your move.

And 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.*"

When we were unbelievers, we were prisoners of the law and the law dictated our behavior—not by making us obey it, **but by provoking us to rebel against it.**

The commandment says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s ox or donkey” and I think, *“No problem! I don’t want my neighbor’s ox or donkey! On the other hand, I sure wouldn’t mind having his Corvette! Or, even better, his Dodge Viper! I certainly deserve it more than he does!”*

The commandments don’t settle down the sin within us; they stir it up.

It never occurred to me to smoke a cigarette until one day in the second grade a man came to our class and warned us against the evils of smoking.

I went home, filched a Phillip Morris out of my mother’s purse and lit up.

I did it precisely because someone told me not to do it.

This is why Paul writes that *“...the power of sin is the law.”*

Sin is rebellion and the law is authority and authority is to rebellion what gasoline is to fire.

Anything that can control me is my jail keeper.

And the law controls me because it drives me 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.’”*

And this is exactly how God intended that things should work.

Paul writes: *“The law was added so that sin would increase.”*

God knew that when He said, “Thou shalt not...”—we would.

The question is: why would God do something that would cause us to sin?

Paul answers this 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.”*

How does the law lead us to Christ?

*By showing us that all our attempts to obey it are futile:* instead of leading us to obedience they drive us to disobedience.

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 you struggle with the commands of the law, the tighter they become.

Your own struggling is what finally strangles you because the law cannot be obeyed by sinful flesh and we are all sinful flesh.

*"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."*

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 hearts 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 an impossible position precisely so that we might come to comprehend its impossibility.

So that we would learn through the futility of our struggling that if we would be free of the law and the sin and death it produces in us, we must be set free by One who is far more powerful than we are.

And that Someone, of course, is Christ, who came to bind Satan, the Author and Perfecter of our misery, and 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."*

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.

*"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..."*

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 sinful thoughts and words and actions, God has declared that we are righteous and holy.

He hasn't **MADE** us righteous and holy; He has **DECLARED** that we are righteous and holy.

And God's **DECLARATION** has created a new reality for us.

In Paul's words, He has clothed us with Christ.

He has covered up the rebellion in our hearts, the pride in our minds and the sin in our flesh with the garment of Christ's righteousness, and when He looks down on us, He doesn't see what we actually are, he only sees the righteousness of Christ which covers all our sins.

In human terms, God blinds Himself to our sins and sees us as better than we really are.

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

And so that is what we were and that is what we are: prisoners who have been set free.

Sinners declared to be righteous holy people, clean and spotless.

This is where Christ has brought us; this is our relationship with God.

He looks at us through the eyes of the Good Shepherd and we are the sheep of His pasture.

Jesus has covered our sins with His broken body and His blood and He says to His Father: *"When you look upon all who are Mine, see only me. I have hidden their sins from your eyes."*

That is who and what we are.

God has made the first move and now he says to us: "Your move."

And what is our next move?

Many Christians get confused at this point.

We're not sure what to do next: if we try to lead holier lives 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.

Like pieces on a chess board we trust the chess master to place us where we can best serve His purposes.

As the saying goes: our next move is to let go and let God..

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..."

Now a branch doesn't struggle to bear fruit; it bears fruit naturally *because it is attached to the vine.*

It becomes fruitful by abiding in the vine.

The responsibility of the branch is to remain connected to the vine and draw life from its source.

So 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."

Through the Psalmist, God says: "Be still and know that I am God."

God will produce fruit out of his disciples simply by virtue of their position in Christ: if they are His, then He will work in them and through them to produce fruit for His kingdom.

Faith is not holding onto God; faith is believing that God is holding onto us and will lead us where He wants us to go.

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.