

Preached by The Rev. Dr. Syl Lorenzo Shannon
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
Sunday, August 15, 2010

Isaiah 5:1–7
Luke 12:49–56

***Fifth Sermon in Series on FOUR LETTER WORDS
WAYS***

Do you receive many emails? Some of them are not good enough to share, but I have one I think is good enough to share because it's about caring and sharing. Several years ago, a preacher from out of state accepted a call from a church in Houston, Texas. Some weeks after he arrived, he had an occasion to ride the bus from his home to the downtown area. When he sat down, he discovered that the driver had accidentally given him a quarter too much change. As he considered what to do, he thought to himself, "You better give the quarter back; it would be wrong to keep it." Then he thought, "Oh, forget it. It's only a quarter. Who would worry about this little amount? Anyway, the bus company gets too much fare. They will never miss it. Accept it as a gift from God and keep it quiet."

When his stop came, he paused momentarily at the door and then he handed the quarter to the driver and said, "Here, you gave me too much change." The driver with a smile replied, "Aren't you the new preacher in town?" "Yes," he replied. "Well, I've been thinking a lot lately about going somewhere to worship. I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you too much change. I'll see you in church on Sunday."

When the preacher stepped off the bus, he literally grabbed the nearest light pole, held on, and said, "Oh God, I almost sold your son for a quarter."

Our lives are the only Bible some people will ever read. This is really scary, isn't it? A really scary example of how much people watch us as Christians, and will put us to the test. Always be on guard and remember: you carry the name of Christ on your shoulders when you call yourself *Christian*. Watch your thoughts. They become your words. Watch your words. They become your actions. Watch your actions. They become habits. Watch your habits. They become character. Watch your character. It becomes your destiny.

I'm glad a friend forwarded this email to me as a reminder. And I share it with you as we focus in on a few ideas about change of heart and change of mind.

I'm putting a little book together. I hope I'll have it done by Christmas at least to prove to my wife that I follow through. It's going to be called *Four Letter Words*. So you'll have to help me decide whether the subject is "turn" or "ways."

Prayer: *Come Lord Jesus and be our guest.
And let this word to us be blessed.*

"Hey! You are going the wrong way! Turn around, go to the corner. Turn right. You will see the Post Office on the right-hand side of the street (You dumb bunny)." No one wishes to hear that kind of remark from his spouse, or neighbor, or even a close friend.

Thank God for the GPS. You make a wrong turn or become a little bit lost ... and all this modern day guide does is announce: "Recalculating." This is a bit easier to handle, especially if you have been on the road a long time; say, four hours going a distance that would normally take two hours.

Well, that is what I came to tell you on this summer Sunday. God allows us to make U-turns. God permits us to have a change of heart and change directions. Often, there is a parallel path ... another road ... another way, like Highway 1, which runs alongside I-95.

This sermon has absolutely nothing to do with the Scriptures read in your hearing (or perhaps Psalm 1 does). It is what I have been wrestling with as my family traveled from place to place this summer. We go to the Outer Banks ... because that is something you do in the summer. We attend family reunions and gatherings of fraternity and sorority friends and talk about what we wish we'd done and what we have done. Does not matter how far we must travel or which direction we must go. We show up. Then we return home and complain about how much we had to spend.

I am glad Carl had his son's wedding to attend so I could say publicly what's on my mind. News by its very nature is often about the misdeeds of people. So the fact that the Wall Street Journal had a front-page story a while back about a young man who stole some \$20 million by a phone slamming scheme and then disappeared really was nothing unusual. But it caught my eye—grabbed my attention—because of the headline, "How a Minister's Son Discovered 'Slamming' and Then Disappeared."

Daniel Fletcher is the son of the Rev. John Fletcher, the pastor of Faith Bible Church in Sterling, Virginia. According to his parents, he was "a good kid." In fact, he originally planned to follow his father into the ministry. At age 16, while recuperating from the flu, Daniel memorized the entire book of James from the New Testament. Later he attended Bible colleges, first in Maryland and then in California.

So in a real sense Daniel was on his way, but somewhere along the way, he apparently made a decision not to continue in the path in which he had been raised. He invented some phony long-distance phone service companies, and by various forms of trickery, he got thousands of people switched to his accounts—a practice called "slamming"—and collected lots of money from his unsuspecting victims, as well as from Sprint and AT&T.

By the time the U.S. Senate permanent Subcommittee on Investigations was wise to him and ready to move against him, he had dropped out of sight, taking his millions with him. I assume he's currently living it up in some country that has no extradition agreement with the United States.

Here is a young man who grew up surely knowing right from wrong—surely knowing about God's intentions for how people should live—and apparently affirming them early on. But then, at some point, he chose the other way. You see, when looked at from the point of view of the Bible, there are only two roads to travel—two ways to live—God's way and the other way.

Think about what it was like when we were children. Most of us had some pretty clear-cut ideas of what was right and what was wrong, at least as far as our little world was concerned. When our parents said to us, “Be a good boy,” or “Be a good girl,” we didn't have to ask, “Now what's that supposed to mean?” We generally had a pretty good idea about that. Of course, our understanding of what was right didn't necessarily guarantee that we behaved ourselves, but when we did get into mischief, we generally did so knowing full well that we were doing something that we weren't supposed to do.

As adults, however, we may have come to accept that right and wrong is not so clear-cut as we had thought. We've encountered complex situations where the line between right and wrong sometimes seemed blurred. Sometimes we have been forced to make choices: not between good and bad, but between two lousy solutions, neither one of them good; neither one of them okay. We've come to understand such terms as "the lesser of two evils," "compromise," "ambiguities," "no absolutes," "gray areas," "trade-offs" and "moral dilemmas." All we need to do is watch CNN and see what the congressmen are saying.

Given that viewpoint, it may be difficult for us to really hear what Psalm 1 is saying to us, for it presents life in black-and-white terms. It indicates that a person is either good and righteous or bad and wicked, with no categories in between. That perspective seems foreign to us in our world today. We are more apt to think that we are all a mixture of good and bad.

The author of Psalm 1 would not embrace that kind of thinking. You and I are caught up in a life where we have choices to make. We can go left, we can go right, or we can just sit and wait. In the view of the psalmist, people are either godly or not. There are no fence-sitters. And not only that, but the psalmist maintains that the godly person will prosper while the ungodly will perish!

The Psalm contains six verses. Three describe the righteous and three the wicked. There is no description of any in between.

It reminds me of the poem of a Methodist bishop who said:

*To everyone there's open a way and the way,
And the high soul climbs the high way,
And the low soul gropes the low.
And, in between, on the mystic flats,
The rest drift to and fro.*

And unfortunately in our culture today, even our TV stories and our teachers are not willing to hold the moral compass to teach precisely right from wrong.

So, as we examine the word “turn” or as we examine the word “ways,” I remind you that you, as a Christian person, have some of the responsibility to decide which way you will go. It reminds me of my favorite story—the story of Claude Brown in a book called, *Manchild in the Promised Land*.

Claude Brown was in and out of reformatory schools, day after day and month after month. Claude Brown just couldn't get a handle on his life. And they one day when he was getting ready to go get a fix of drugs or maybe to spend time with a girl, he was standing on the stoop of his apartment in Harlem with a fine brown suit on and a brief case in his hand. A little boy was walking his dog (I think this is on about page 253 in the standard copy of the book). The little boy looked at Claude Brown and said, “Mister, where you going?” Claude Brown wouldn't dare tell him where he was going because he was on his way to get a fix or to do drugs. Claude Brown said, “Boy, go and walk your dog and leave me alone.” The little boy said, “Mister, you're cool. When I grow up I want to be like you.”

In his book, Claude Brown says as he walked down the stoop, the truant officers, the teachers, nobody had gotten to him—but the little boy did. The boy had said, “I want to be like you when I grow up.” Claude Brown said, “I ought to be going somewhere and doing something worthwhile. I ought to be on the way to success so that if someone wants to be like me they have something good to emulate.”

Christian friends, why aren't we strong in the church? When last did we talk with someone about our faith? When last did we take a moment to say, “Things are different for me since I've fallen in love with Christ?” When last have we walked by faith, rather than by sight? When last have we said, “I think I'll turn in a new direction?”

Claude Brown did. After the little boy talked with him, he came to Howard University. He got a degree in English and stayed and got a law degree. And then he wrote his story.

I pray to God that this summer you're not just drifting through the holidays, going from place to place, but that you're walking with the Lord in the light of His love. I pray that someone's message to you will help you decide to turn the right way.

Amen.