

Hindsight is 20/20

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

July 9, 2017

Romans 7:15–25a

Around twenty years ago, I started wearing glasses. At the time, it was just for reading, which it had been getting harder to do. I'd find myself squinting to make out the print in things I had to or wanted like to read. After a while of that, too long of that, I got over my resistance and went to have my eyes checked. In short order, I had my first pair of reading glasses.

For awhile now, maybe 10 years, I've been wearing glasses pretty much all the time, except, of course, for sleeping and showering and shaving. They're not just for reading anymore. Sure, I can make do without them for some things. I am not dependent on them for eating, or driving, or walking. But it's just more comfortable if I keep the blasted things on. Without them, the blurriness is just too annoying.

Sure, I miss not needing glasses. I miss having really great eyesight. But given that I need them, I'm glad that I have the glasses, so I can still do a number of things that rely on seeing.

As you know, how good your eyesight is can be measured. They call it "visual acuity." It uses those sets of numbers like "20/20" or "20/40" or "20/200." These all compare your eyesight to what a person with supposedly normal or average vision sees.

So, if you have 20/40 vision, you will see at 20 feet away from something what someone else with normal eyesight will see at 40 feet. That means your eyesight's not great, and you probably have glasses, at least for reading.

With 20/200 eyesight, you have to be 20 feet from something to see what a person of normal eyesight sees from 200 feet away ... which means that you're legally blind.

If you have 20/10 eyesight, then congratulations! — you have better than average eyesight, as you are able to see at 20 feet what average people can see clearly only if they're standing 10 feet away.

And if you have 20/20 eyesight (as maybe I did when I was a kid, and some of you, too), then you have normal eyesight, making you able to read a row of letters a third of an inch high from 20 feet. You have no need for glasses. You can see clearly without any help.

All of this lies behind that old saying, "Hindsight is 20/20." Which is not about seeing clearly letters or numbers or road signs or a friend's face. Instead, it's about seeing clearly the past: seeing it and even more *perceiving* it, understanding it, knowing it for what it *really* was rather than what you at the time *thought* it was.

Yes, hindsight is 20/20: the past is much more clearly seen from the present.

Hindsight is 20/20: had I known then what I know now, I would have acted differently.

Hindsight is 20/20: yesterday's reasonable choices are seen today as regrettable, maybe even forgivable, mistakes, flowing from an incomplete understanding of all the relevant facts.

There's a truth in this saying. It's truthful because life has a clarity in retrospect that it never has in anticipation, or even when it's right before you. Many of the choices we made would

surely have been different if we knew then what we know now. But, as they say, hindsight is 20/20.

The saying is truthful in another, deeper sense. Sometimes we come to understand something, truly understand it, when we look back on it. Much like you can appreciate the beauty of a mountain when you look at it from some miles distant rather than from within the groves of trees that girdle its base, so it is with life, with our actions or even our own personalities. Understanding can be very difficult to find close up, but put some distance in there, some time, and you begin to see the shape of things in a way you could not make out before.

The single parent who now struggles with a life full of demands but short on appreciation now begins to understand the motivations of the teenager she or he once was.

The retiree for whom career is past and mortality is oh-so-present understands how blessed, or how short-sighted, were the career choices of 45 years ago.

Hindsight is 20/20.



Paul, the apostle, knew a lot about this 20/20 hindsight. He knew that the backward glance at who he had been now gave him a clarity that escaped him years before. He knew that he now understood the person he had been, much better than he ever could have back then. It was as if the pieces now fit together, whereas before he did not even notice that there *were* pieces. It was as if the motivations, the possibilities, the failures, all were now clear to him, whereas before he hardly recognized them at all.

And so he could now say, as he didn't and couldn't before, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Hindsight is 20/20.

He could now say, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."

Hindsight is 20/20.

He could now say, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

Hindsight is 20/20.

I say that this was hindsight for Paul, because I think it's pretty clear that he would *not* have said these things about himself before he became a follower of Jesus. As some proof, let me offer you Paul's own words, in his letter to the Philippians:

"If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

That's Paul's own assessment of his attitude before his conversion, when he was not a follower of Jesus but a persecutor of those who did follow Jesus. This was before Jesus appeared to Paul, before Jesus knocked him off his horse, before Jesus knocked him off his smug confidence that by meticulously following the commandments of God he had earned God's favor.

But now he saw that he had been wrong: dreadfully, disastrously, tragically wrong.

You see, back before his conversion to the way of Jesus, Paul had believed that he was good, truly good. After all, he followed the law of God. And the law of God, given to Moses and faithfully, lovingly passed on by generations of priests and rabbis, was the expression of the will of God.

But something had happened as he was intent on keeping God's law and following God's will. In trying to obey God's law, he ended up opposing Jesus. But Jesus, who he is and what he did, is the supreme expression of God's will. Paul now knew:

in Jesus, we see what God desires of us;
in Jesus, we see the beginning, middle, and end of God's story;
in Jesus, we truly find the will of God.

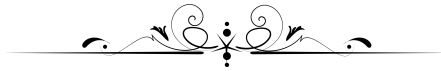
And here was the irony, and the tragedy: in Paul's zeal to keep the commandments of God, and in that way to be good with God, he ended up rejecting the will of God. For he had rejected Jesus Christ.

This was what Paul now saw with the clarity of 20/20 hindsight: that with the best of intentions, with the best method for achieving the good on his own, Paul had not pleased God, but had rejected God.

Without question, something had gone seriously wrong. But Paul refused to accept that what was wrong was the law. The law was given by God, and so of course it was good.

No, what had gone wrong was not found in the law, but in Paul himself. For in himself was something that latched onto his well-intentioned efforts to please God by following the law, took those efforts and directed them, not to good, but to evil.

That something was *sin*.



“Sin,” of course, is a word that has its share of baggage. It strikes many people as old fashioned, or worse. It's often misunderstood, or understood in a woefully inadequate way. It's a word that's been used, or really abused, to criticize some and to make others feel superior.

For some, sin means sex. For others, it means wild living. A fair number of cynics think sin is just a conscience in desperate need of therapy. Many, it seems, confuse *sin* with the *sins* that are its expression, the innumerable transgressions both great and small that are the sign of something deeply wrong, the condition called, quite simply, “sin.”

The thing is, you can't really understand sin apart from any notion of God. You can't really understand sin outside of a *relationship* with God. Sin is not merely about dos and don'ts.

It's more about being separated from God;
it's about a rupture in relationship between a creature and the creator;
it's about acting contrary to the will of the One who gave you life.

Paul understood this. He understood this in the light of the love and forgiveness he knew in Jesus Christ. This enabled him to see God truly. This gave him 20/20 hindsight so he could see how wrong he had been, and understand just how powerful sin truly is, how deep it truly reaches.

Sin ruins everything.

It takes the beautiful and makes it ugly.
It takes the lofty and makes it base.
It takes our best deeds and redirects them for foul ends.

Sin curses human beings with a reverse Midas-touch, so that rather than everything we lay our hands on turning to gold, instead it all turns to junk.

I don't think I am overstating things. For of all the good that we do, how much of it is *truly* good, *completely* good, without any hint of self-interest or jealousy or envy or mean-spiritedness or self-satisfaction? For all the good we do, how much of it is really, when held alongside the purity of God, truly good?

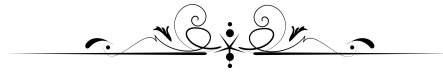
None of it.

We want to believe that the good we have and the good we do are really good. But they aren't, not really, not completely.

We convince ourselves that we are living in accordance with God's will. But really, we again and again live in opposition to it.

We want to believe that God is impressed with our incomplete goodness, and tend to think that God is satisfied with our never-fully-acted-upon good intentions. But God is not.

The end of all this is tragedy, ironic tragedy, *if* that was all there was to it. If there was nothing else to be said, then the ignorance of those who oppose God even as they believe they are obeying God would be the tragic last word at the end of a very sad story.



But it isn't the last word, not for Paul, not for us.

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Jesus is the last word,

answering the question that sighs from our failed good intentions,
giving God's "yes" to us who deserve God's "no."

Jesus is the new possibility, transforming our tragic tendency to fail into something new for us:

to be good and to become even more good,
to grow in love and to love in growing,
to serve God and to obey God.

Jesus is the divine light,

shining in our darkness;
illuminating our past, present, and future;
enabling us to see God's will and our place in it.

Jesus is the savior,

rescuing us from sin's corrupting power,
freeing us from self-interest and self-satisfaction,
bringing glory to God with our converted lives.

Jesus is the master artist,

reworking what sin has made ugly,
remaking what rebellion has broken,
repainting our lives into things of beauty and delight.

Jesus is the master physician,

making the lame to walk,
raising the dead to new life,
giving 20/20 eyesight to the morally nearsighted and the spiritually blind.

My friends, may each of us, more and more, come to know

the depth of Christ's love,
the extent of his healing power,
and the breadth of his forgiveness,

and may we all begin to see, with greater and greater clarity, our past, our present, and our future as these are embraced and given shape by the Son of God, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is to be worshiped and adored.