

There is a hilarious story about a farmer who had three sons: Ron, Don and Little John. All had their names on the church roll, but none ever attended church or had time for God. Then one day Don was bitten by a rattlesnake. The doctor was called, and he did all he could to help Don, but the outlook for his recovery was very dim. So, the pastor was called to evaluate the situation.

The pastor arrived and began to pray: *“O wise and righteous Father, we thank Thee that in Thine wisdom thou didst send this rattlesnake to bite Don. He hasn’t been inside the church in years and has shown little interest in You. We trust that this experience will be a valuable lesson to him and will lead him to genuine repentance. And now, O Father, wilt thou send another rattlesnake to bite Ron, and another to bite Little John, and another big one to bite the old man. For years we have done everything we know to get them to get serious with Thee. Thank you, God, for rattlesnakes. Amen.”*

That’s some prayer, isn’t it? We don’t know if Don recovered or not, but if he did, maybe he decided that God had given him a **SECOND CHANCE** and was in church the following Sunday. **SECOND CHANGES ARE GOOD!!!**

Some of you remember a man named Alan Simpson who served with distinction as a Republican member of the United States Senate from Wyoming from 1979 to 1997. In his younger years, however, Alan Simpson was NOT so careful with his life.

Not too long ago, Simpson was involved in a Supreme Court case, *Graham v. Florida*. In a brief in support of the claimant in the case, Simpson admitted that as a juvenile he was--in his own words--“a monster.” At one time he was on federal probation for shooting mailboxes and punching a cop.

One day when Simpson was in high school, he and some friends “went out to do damage.” They went to an abandoned war relocation structure and decided to “torch” it. They committed arson on federal property, a crime now punishable by up to twenty years in prison if no one is hurt, and punishable by up to life in prison if the arson causes a person’s death. Luckily for Simpson, no one was injured in the blaze.

Simpson not only played with fire, but he also played with guns. He played a game with his friends in which they shot at rocks. These were rocks situated close to the other participants, at times using bullets they stole from the local hardware store. The goal of the game was to come as close as possible to striking someone without doing so. Again, Simpson was lucky: no one was killed or seriously injured.

Simpson and his friends went shooting firearms throughout their community. They fired at mailboxes, blowing holes in several and killing a cow. They fired at a road grader. Federal authorities charged Simpson with destroying government property. He pleaded guilty. He received two years of probation and was required to make restitution from his own funds--funds that he was supposed to obtain by holding down a job.

As all this was unfolding, Alan saw his parents look at each other in total disbelief, and he saw his father cry. Fortunately, **Alan Simpson got a second chance, and he became one of the most respected senators of his generation.**

I have to wonder, though, what would have happened if Alan Simpson had been a young black male from a poor family and had committed the same offenses? **Would he have been given the same second chance or would he still be rotting away in prison many years later? Do you believe in second chances? Thankfully, God does.**

**Jesus told a parable:** *“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’”*

**That makes sense, doesn’t it? What good is a fruit tree that doesn’t bear fruit?** Notice that it had been three years that the fig tree has been growing in his vineyard and yet it yielded nothing. Three years is the length of time that it takes a fig tree to become an established, fruit-bearing tree. That it was not bearing at this point seemed highly

unlikely that it would ever bear fruit. So the owner of the vineyard was making a practical business-like decision. The tree's taking up room. It's using fertile soil in which another tree might prosper. **"Cut it down!"** he says to the man who cared for his vineyard.

But the man who cared for the vineyard tries to intervene. "Sir," the man replies, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down." Obviously the man who cared for the vineyard saw possibilities in the tree that the owner of the tree could not. The owner could see only a tree that WAS DOING NOTHING. **But the man who looked after the tree was more familiar with it and believed the tree deserved another chance. Think about this story...it is about God, Jesus and you and me.**

**Thank God for second chances.** Some of you may have seen a movie a few years ago titled *Catch Me if You Can*. It was an exciting movie based on the true story of Frank W. Abagnale, played in the movie by Leonardo DiCaprio.

Frank's dad, Frank, Sr., played by Christopher Walken, was, for a time, in serious trouble with the I.R.S. His self-indulgent wife divorced him. The resulting break-up of his family had a profound effect on young Frank, aged sixteen. He began acting out his frustration by impersonating adults engaged in several vocations.

For example, he becomes a substitute teacher even though he was only a high schooler himself at the time. Then he successfully impersonated a Pan Am co-pilot. After that he impersonated a physician (yes, a medical doctor). How would you like a high school kid operating on you? He also impersonated a lawyer.

He funded these adventures by passing hundreds of fake checks. He succeeded partly because he was careful to dress right--after all, clothes make the man (they say), and more importantly because he possessed a convincing charm--enough charm to acquire information, hotel rooms, flights around the world, and oodles of cash.

In the film a determined FBI agent, played by Tom Hanks, tracks Frank across several continents. Arrested and sentenced to 12 years in jail, 26-year-old Frank is given a second chance by the government. He is given early release in return for his skill and expertise. As a consultant to the FBI and thousands of corporations around the world, he is now known as one of the world's leading experts on fraud.

He is also a polished public speaker addressing corporations about how to protect themselves from people like him. True story. Frank Abagnale, like Alan Simpson, is a man who could testify, **"Thank God for second chances."**

Here's something we should note. **A second chance implies that something we've done is wrong. We need to consider this truth for a few moments while we still have the word "sin" in our vocabulary. I am very Serious.** The whole concept that God would ever pass judgment on human beings is fast disappearing from American religion. Writer David Brooks in his recent best-selling book *The Road to Character* says that we have done our young people a disservice in letting this ancient word-SIN-slip from our modern lexicon. We have made it very difficult for our young FOLK to even talk about right and wrong. **I believe he is right.**

That wonderful preacher Dr. Tom Long tells a story about one of his students who hailed him one day as he walked across campus. **"Dr. Long," she said, "could I speak to you for a minute?"**

Long said, "I'm going to get a cup of coffee, you want to go?" She did, and as they were sharing coffee, she told him what was on her mind. She said that she was serving as a field education student in a local church and that her supervising pastor was requiring her to preach next Sunday. Long said, "Good."

She said, "No. It's not good. He's making me preach on the lectionary." Long again said, "Good." She said, "It's not good. Have you read the lectionary texts for this week? They're all about judgment. I don't believe in judgment. I believe in grace. I believe in mercy. I believe . . . it took me three years of therapy to get over judgment. I am not going to preach judgment."

They talked about it for a while and then they moved on to other things. She started to tell Dr. Long about her family life. She and her husband have several children, only the youngest of whom--a teenage boy--was still at home and he was driving them crazy. He was into drugs, maybe dealing them, in trouble with the police.

She said, “Like last night we were sitting at supper, we had no idea where our son was. In the middle of supper, he comes in the back door, and I said would you like some supper and he practically spit at us. He just stomped down the hall to his room and slammed the door.” She said, “My husband got up and turned on ESPN. That is always his response to this.”

She said, “I don’t know, something got into me.” She said, “I’m afraid of my son physically. Physically afraid of my own son. But something got into me and I got up from the table and I went down to his room and I pushed open the door and I said to him, ‘You listen to me. I love you so much I am not going to put up with this.’”

Tom Long said, *“Caroline, I think you just preached a sermon on judgment. God loves us so much God will not put up with the foolishness in our lives. We have foolishly hungered for success and power and status, and God says through Jesus, ‘That’s foolish. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice. That’s what makes life free and good . . . Jesus says that’s foolish [to hunger for success and power and status]. I love you so much I’m not going to put up with that.’”*

**To say that God gives us second chances is to imply the fact of God’s judgment on our sometimes-foolish lives.** God created us to bear fruit--*the fruit of love, joy, peace, [tolerance], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* (Galatians 5:22-23). To think that God would forever put up with our lack of fruit . . . and even the bearing of wrong fruit . . . simply defies logic. We don’t know what form God’s judgment may take, whether in this world or the next, **but God does judge.** If nothing else, we see foolishness taking a toll on our bodies, our relationships, our reputations, on our witness to others.

The late humorist Lewis Grizzard once said that thinking about God’s final judgment over our lives scared the “you-know-what” out of him. One day he received a questionnaire in the mail titled **“Heaven: Are You Eligible?”** Grizzard said he took the test and scored *“too close to call.”* I suspect that all of us might score *“too close to call.”* **Thank God for second chances.** But a second chance implies that we are not living our lives at the highest level, and we need to do something about it. **That’s called REPENTANCE.**

*“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So, he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’”*

And who can argue that the owner had the right to cut down the nonbearing tree? Look around you. That is how all of life is ordered. It is part of the law of sowing and reaping. **HOW MANY OF US ARE NON-PRODUCING?**

*“Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?” The need for a second chance implies that something we’ve done is wrong, and we need to do something about it.*

**Life’s second chance is what the cross is about.** “So, he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. *Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’”*

“But the man who cared for the vineyard replied, *‘Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’* The man who cared for the vineyard obviously represents Christ. *Someone once called Christ “the forgiving side of God.”*

**Second chances are what the CROSS of Christ is all about. Christ lives with God to make intercession on our behalf.** The question is, **what will we do in response to the second chance God gives us?** Do we continue to make the same foolish mistakes? **OR Do we try and change for the sake of our Relationship with God?**

**Lent is a time that shows us that second chances are designed to help us learn and grow stronger as we make our journey through life—OUR JOURNEY WITH GOD.** *A journey that invites us to bear more and better fruit as we grow.* Lent is a reminder that tells us we sometimes miss the mark during the challenges in our life. But fortunately for us and others, **Christ offers us a SECOND CHANCE. Won’t you accept his gracious offer and start a new beginning today? Amen.**