



There Is a Little Maxwell Smart in All of Us

TEXT
Isaiah 6:1–11

November 11, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

When I was a kid, there was a TV show called *Get Smart*. Maxwell Smart was a secret agent with the same skill as Inspector Clouseau. His sidekick was Agent 99. He was always taking his shoe off to talk into the heel. He had a phone in there. And in every episode, he failed, but he would cover his failure with these words: Missed it by that much. That's what he would say: "Missed it by that much."

I think there is a little Maxwell Smart in all of us. We miss it sometimes. One way the tradition speaks of sin is to say we "miss the mark." I don't know what the old word "sin" makes you think of.

John Calvin, the grandfather of Presbyterian theology, used to speak of human beings as examples of "total depravity." Ugh! That sounds pretty low. I mean, it's hard not to argue that human beings have serious problems, but totally depraved?

This is what Calvin meant. Total depravity does not mean that we are absent of good; no, not at all. We know from our own experience that there is real and genuine goodness in people. But we also know that no one is

good all the time. Total depravity means that we aren't pure. It's not that we can't be good; it's that even when we are, we don't escape a hint of selfishness. We are good, but we are not who Christ calls us to be. We fall short. We miss it by that much.

Frances Spufford says it this way: "Wherever the line is drawn between good and evil, between acceptable and unacceptable ... we're always ... [walking] on both sides of [that line.]"¹ And not just by accident. As Spufford says, "It's our active inclination to break stuff, including moods, promises, relationships we care about and our own well-being."²

We have a consistent inclination to mess things up, even things we care about. I know this.

The Paul Kelly Men's Bible Class met on the third floor in a church I served before. They had been meeting there for about 100 years. Jim was 78 years old and was the "youth group" in the class. These men came to class every Sunday, bringing their Bibles — probably first editions. They loved each other, and they studied together, but there was a problem. Their classroom was the hardest classroom to get to. You had to go up two flights of stairs, then down a long hallway. For some of the guys who were

carrying walkers and whatnot, it was a hardship. I thought, "This is a problem I can fix."

I moved the junior high kids, who were on the first floor, up to the third floor, and the Paul Kelly class down on the first floor, eliminating the stairs and the long walk for the old guys. I was pretty excited.

You aren't going to believe what happened. They were irate. "We have been in that classroom since the beginning of time. How dare you move us?"

"But guys, it's easier to get here."

"We don't care about easy. Do you have any idea how long we have been meeting God in that room? And you want to move us for convenience?" I moved them back.

The complication: What I did was good; it was compassionate; it was caring. But it wasn't pure. It's pretty easy to mess things up, even things we care about. Total depravity.

That's why the scriptures are filled with stories of confession. Peter says to Jesus, "Go from me, for I am a sinful man." King David pens the Psalm, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, for I am a sinful man." That great prophet Isaiah says, "I entered the temple and God was present, and I said,

‘Woe is me, for I am lost.’” Missed it by that much!

I think because missing it is so common, we have developed some ways to try to deal with sin on our own. One is we take the teachings of Jesus, we take the dreams that God has for her people, and we reduce them down to more reasonable expectations. We treat it like one of those basketball goals that you can crank down to a reasonable level. If we can’t hit a 10-foot goal, just crank it down a few feet. Make the gospel life more reasonable — live it at six feet.

Early in my ministry, I met with a couple for premarital counseling. Among other things I told them, as I always do, is that they should determine how much of their money they were going to give away. Money is sometimes a stress point in marriages, and giving some away is a help. The groom asked me, “How much do you suggest we give away?”

I said, “Well, the church encourages a tithe as a good place to start.” He didn’t go to church, so this was a new word for him.

“What’s a tithe?”

I explained, “Traditionally, a tithe is 10 percent of your income.”

“Interesting,” he said.

Well, for the only time that I know of in my ministry, someone actually listened to me in premarital counseling, and they decided to tithe. They were excited about it. That didn’t surprise me. I have never known anyone who tithes to be anything but excited about it. The person who wasn’t

excited about it was Ralph, the bride’s father.

At the wedding rehearsal, Ralph pulled me aside and he said, “Preacher, I know what you are saying, and I appreciate it and everything, but now is not the time for these kids to tithe. They are just getting started. They can’t afford it now.”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that. They should wait until they could afford it. But soon, they will need to buy their first house. Those are tight times. And then the children come. And when a child takes that first breath, she sucks in your net worth. And then there’s college. I had two in college at one time. I was looking for night work until I realized I already had night work.

Then there are weddings and planning for retirement, and then you retire, and you can’t tithe on a fixed income. The truth is, we can’t ever afford it. Ralph is right about that.

So that has to be the point. Living our faith is not something we simply afford, squeeze it in. It shapes our choices. Our faith is supposed to show up in our choices about time and relationships and money.

But we know the temptation: Crank that goal down a few feet and make it more reasonable. Let’s just do what we can afford. Don’t worry about forgiving 70 times 7, be reasonable. Loving your neighbors is one thing, but your enemies? Be sensible.

You see, we just crank that gospel goal down to a level we can slam dunk it with ease. But the thing about the gospel life is that we don’t get to set the height

of the goal; Jesus has done that. We are to be like him. And when we face who he is, and we see who we are, woe is me, for I am lost. Missed it by that much!

Another reality of sin in our lives: It’s easier to see sin in my neighbor than it is to see in me.

Hartley Hall was the president of Union Seminary when I was a student there. He saw me coming out of the library and said, “Hey, Are, get over here. I hear Carol said yes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How’d you talk her into that?”

“Yes, sir, her dad asked the same question. Actually, *my* dad asked the same question.”

“Well,” he said, “you’ve done it now. You won’t be able to lie anymore.”

I said, “I’m not lying to her.”

He said, “I didn’t say that. You won’t be able to lie to yourself anymore. She will know the whole truth of you.” That old man, what did he know? Turns out he knew a lot! We have been married for 31 years, and he was right. Carol sees things in me that I never saw before — and very seldom are they inspiring.

There was an incident, I don’t remember the details, but my father-in-law was acting in a way that I thought did not show my wife complete respect. Dads can be that way sometimes. We forget that our grown children are grown, and we treat them like they are children. Well, he was treating her like a little girl, and I didn’t like it. So, I told him so. He was not immediately receptive, but I held my ground. “You shouldn’t treat her like

a little girl,” I said. “She’s a grown woman and deserves your respect.”

“I’m not disrespecting her,” he said.

“Are too.”

“Am not.” It went from there.

Carol was silent. I didn’t need her to thank me for standing up for her. I knew she felt loved and appreciated.

But you are never going to guess what happened. She was mad at me. Can you believe it? “Do you think,” she said, “do you think I need you to fix my relationship with my own father? Do you think I can’t take care of this on my own? Don’t treat me like I’m a little girl.”

Uhh! I have an amazing ability to mess things up: promises, relationships, things I care about. I can just miss it a bit — total depravity.

You see, I could see the sin in him, but to my own, I was blind. I have learned that there is a difference between physical blindness and spiritual blindness. People who are physically blind have taught me this: They know they cannot see. When you are physically blind, you know you can’t see.

But when we are blind spiritually, relationally, we still see something, so we assume what we see is the whole truth; we have no idea that there is truth there we just don’t see. That is the purest blindness: to be blind and not know it.

Here’s what I know. There’s a little Maxwell Smart in all of us. We all have an amazing capacity to mess things up, even things we care about. We mess

things up in our city. We mess things up in our families. We mess things up with God.

And when we do, there is grace. And I want to talk about grace next week, but I don’t want to rush there yet. Because first I want us to pay attention to what the faith teaches us to do when we miss it. It’s important.

When we miss it, we need to say so. We need to say so to God, and sometimes to others:

Woe is me, for I am lost. But God don’t let me lower the goal. Don’t let me live in blindness. Open my eyes, to see the truth of myself, and then hear me as I say, have mercy ... for I am lost. I have missed it.

¹Frances Spufford, *Unapologetic* (2012), p. 33

²Ibid., p. 27

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.