

The Moses Syndrome
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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: Exodus 3:1-14 Related comments at www.faithfulperspective.blogspot.com

Excuses, Excuses! Everyone Has Them

NO EXCUSE SUNDAY: DEDICATED TO MISSING CHURCH ATTENDEES!

To make it possible for everyone to attend church this Sunday, we are going to have a special "No Excuse Sunday." Cots will be placed in the foyer for those who say, "Sunday is my only day to sleep in." There will be a special section with lounge chairs for those who feel that our pews are too hard. Eye drops will be available for those with tired eyes from watching TV late Saturday night. We will have steel helmets for those who say, "The roof would cave in if I ever came to church." Blankets will be furnished for those who think the church is too cold, and fans for those who say it is too hot. Scorecards will be available for those who wish to list the hypocrites present. Relatives and friends will be in attendance for those who can't go to church and cook dinner, too. We will distribute "Stamp Out Stewardship" buttons for those that feel the church is always asking for money. One section will be devoted to trees and grass for those who like to seek God in nature. Doctors and nurses will be in attendance for those who plan to be sick on Sunday. The sanctuary will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who never have seen the church without them. We will provide hearing aids for those who can't hear the preacher and ear plugs for those who think he's too loud! Hope to see you there! (This spoof of a church bulletin announcement has been around in various forms for many years. The source is unknown.)

Other excuses that have been offered for not attending:

I've worked all week so I'm too tired to go!

The preacher moves around too much.

There are no people my age so I'm not going.

They don't meet my needs.

There are too many hypocrites in church.

There are too many sinners in church.

I'm too young - I'll go when I'm too old to have any more fun.

I'm too old. I've had my day. Time for these young folks to step up.

It's boring.

I'm not good enough.

I'm still a sinner.

I'll go to church after I stop smoking.

I'll go to church after I stop drinking.

I work lots of overtime....so I'm too tired to worship God.

I don't get up in time on Sunday morning.

I don't think I really believe in God.... I'm just not sure.

I listen to church on the radio.¹

In his book, *Teacher Man*, Frank McCourt, the Irish author, tells of his experience teaching English at a rough-and-tumble public high school in Staten Island.² After he had been at the school for a time, he began to collect the notes he received from students excusing their absence or their inability to complete an assignment. Those notes supposedly were from a parent, but they were clearly forged. Nothing particularly noteworthy in that.

What interested McCourt, however, and why he saved the excuse notes, is how wonderfully written they were, far superior to any other writing his students would do. He writes, "If [their parents] could read those notes they'd discover their kids capable of the finest American prose: fluent, imaginative, clear, dramatic, fantastic, focused, persuasive, useful."

And here are some of the excuses he collected:

"The stove caught fire and the wallpaper went up and the fire department kept us out of the house all night."

"Arnold doesn't have his work today because he was getting off the train yesterday and the door closed on his school bag and the train took it away. He yelled to the conductor who said very vulgar things as the train drove away. Something should be done."

"A man died in the bathtub upstairs and it overflowed and messed up all Roberta's homework on the table."

"Her big brother got mad at her and threw her essay out the window and it flew away all over Staten Island which is not a good thing because people will read it and get the wrong impression unless they read the ending which explains everything."

"We were evicted from our apartment and the mean sheriff said if my son kept yelling for his notebook he'd have us all arrested."

McCourt reflects, "Isn't it remarkable, I thought, how they resist any kind of writing assignment in class or at home. They whine and say they're busy and it's hard putting two hundred words together on any subject. Why? I have a drawer full of excuse notes that could be turned into an anthology of Great American Excuses."

So one day McCourt gave his students an assignment. He wrote it on the board: "An Excuse Note from Adam to God" or "An excuse note from Eve to God." He told his students that they could start their essays in class and finish them at home. He writes, "The heads went down. Pens raced across paper. They could do this with one hand tied behind their backs.... The bell rang, and for the first time in my three and a half years of teaching, I saw high school students so immersed they had to be urged out of the room by friends hungry for lunch."

That assignment prompted the most imaginative and expressive writing he had seen from his students. They came up with some brilliant excuses for Adam and Eve.

I wonder how many excuses Frank McCourt heard during his tenure at that school. He said he had a desk drawer full of excuse notes. I wonder how big that drawer was. And if that drawer was big, I wonder how big the drawer God must have to hold all of our excuses.

Humankind wasted no time before making excuses for our behavior. According to the biblical account, among the very first words spoken by a man or a woman were words of excuse. God asked Adam, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Adam responded, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate." God then turned to Eve: "What is it you have done?" Eve replied, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

The Bible is full of excuses. Could it be any other way? After all, human life is full of excuses. In our scripture for today, we find one of the great people of human history offering in some cases some rather lame excuses. When God calls to Moses from the burning bush, telling him to lead the people of Israel out of exile in Egypt, Moses immediately begins to offer excuses why he cannot. He tries one excuse after another. When each excuse doesn't work, he just moves on to the next.

First, Moses says, in essence, "Why me? I'm not the right person for the job." When God addresses that excuse, Moses goes on to the next one: "I don't have any authority." When God assures Moses that he will go with God's own authority, Moses says, "The people won't believe that you sent me." "I will give you a sign," God replies. Moses comes back, "But I have a bad stutter. And it's worse when I'm nervous. Who's going to listen to me?" The Lord, who between the time of Adam and the time of Moses has already heard every excuse in the book, responds, "Your brother Aaron can speak for you."

Finally, Moses, out of excuses, is reduced to pleading, "Oh, please send someone else." Moses could have used Aldous Huxley's advice: "Several excuses are always less convincing than one."

Later in the book of Exodus, Moses is on the receiving end of excuses. When he comes down from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments from God, he finds the people dancing around a statue of a golden calf in an act of worship. Moses, who has left his brother Aaron in charge, confronts him. Aaron immediately starts to make excuses:

"You know the people. They are bent on evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (**Exodus 32:22b-24**). Notice: It's the people's fault! It's your fault, Moses! It's the calf's fault! Out came this calf? What can I tell you? Huxley was right: several excuses are always less convincing than one.

In one of Jesus' parables, he compares the kingdom of God to a great banquet. There is a broad invitation, but many give excuses for why they cannot attend: "I've just bought some real estate and I must tend to it; please accept my regrets." "I've just bought some new farm equipment--two oxen--and I want to take them out for a spin." "I just got married. I'll be on my honeymoon." And here's the painful part of that parable: Those who offer excuses miss out. We might even think that they are good excuses, but even good excuses can prevent us from experiencing the greatest blessing of all.

Excuses for Actions (Sins) and Inactions (Disobedience) – The Syndrome

A syndrome is a "concurrence of symptoms." It is most often used to refer to the set of detectable characteristics when the reason that they occur together has not yet been discovered. Even after the reasons become clear, we still refer to things as the ... Syndrome.³ I chose the term because it implies a sickness that compels us to justify ourselves when we are unwilling or unable to do the right thing. Instead of being obedient to God and his call, we go to the fallback position: excuses.

What do your excuses sound like? I'm not talking just about excuses for not worshipping or being in a small group, because you *are* here! What about the excuses you give for *just* coming to worship when there is so much kingdom work to be done and so few to do it? God calls us to be his people, but he also calls us to serve out of that relationship – to serve the church, the community, and the world. That's when we recognize how wonderful it would be to do some of these great things, but it would be more wonderful if someone else would do them!

Moses was well trained for the mission God was calling him to undertake. Remember he was raised as a Prince of Egypt. He just did not want to do it. But God is not interested so much in your training or your desires as he is in your willingness to do what he is leading you to do.

So why do we make excuses?

- We want deflect blame or responsibility. (The devil made me do it!)
- Most of the time we don't object to having the program or ministry God is calling us to. We see value in the work, but more so if someone else does it.
- Fear of not being able to do what is asked of us.
- We don't have time. (No one else has any more than you do!)
- We don't want to take responsibility for living out our faith.
- We simply do not want to do it.

The Alternatives to Excuses – Obedience, Confession and Forgiveness

Excuses have no place in the Christian life. As Christians, we don't have to make excuses. We may still offer excuses, to be sure, but we don't need to. In fact, it is dangerously close to a lack of faith to offer excuses. It's often a tacit admission that we have been disobedient. We don't need to offer self-justifying excuses that God already knows are either less than sincere or pure

fabrications. In fact, we can't justify ourselves. That is God's job. After all, we are, in Paul's wonderful phrase, "justified by grace through faith." There is another way to put it: We are free to recognize that we are not perfect people. We can do that because we rely on the perfect love of God. So the Christian alternatives to excuses are obedience, confession and forgiveness.

I don't know how it is with you, but sometimes I am tempted to throw some excuses in with my confessions. "God, here's what I did and I'm really sorry, but let me tell you why I did that. I had my reasons." Everyone has his/her reasons. But that's not really a confession, is it? Author Kimberly Johnson advises, "**Never ruin an apology with an excuse.**" That's good advice that applies to confession as well: "**Never ruin a confession with an excuse.**" We can afford to try that because we rely on the forgiveness of God. How big is that drawer where God keeps our excuse notes? It's got to be really big. But this is also true: it is not as big as God's capacity for forgiveness.

Another alternative to making excuses is to practice forgiveness with one another. What if we regularly offered one another assurances and signs of forgiveness? And what if we were in faith communities that regularly, consistently offered forgiveness to one another? Would we need excuses anymore? That is, after all, the kind of life that we are called to live. We are regularly to forgive one another in the name of the God who continually, consistently forgives us all. And if we do, there is no longer a need for excuses.

We expect that in the world, there will be excuses, excuses, excuses. And sometimes it will be that way with us, as well. After all, such habits are hard to break. But what if we really believed in the forgiveness of God and could rely on the forgiveness of one another? What if, instead of excuses, excuses, excuses, we heard forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness?

Todd Brock recently shared something very powerful at the HeartLight service. He noted that we get so excited about football about this time every year. We have football parties, tailgate parties, keep track of our teams, and watch special analyses on the games. Sometimes we even tailgate when we do not have tickets just to be near the team we are so passionate about. Why are we not that excited about God who has done far more for us than any football team ever will?

We are more faithful to that which we are for. If we are passionate for God, his work, and his kingdom, we will have less to make excuses about. If we love with the love of the Lord, then we will find ourselves in right relationships with God and others and have a lot less explaining to do. If we are excited about the mission of the church in the world, we will be more interested in investing our time, talents, and energies to kingdom work rather than working hard to come up with reasons why we can't do that now.

God is passionate for you today. He is on your side, cheering you on and calling you to break the Moses Syndrome to enter a new life of hope, faith, and love. Say YES to God today and NO to the forces of this world, and you and I will have a lot less explaining to do. Our lives will be fuller, and the lives of others will be enhanced because of our new enthusiasm for pleasing and serving God.

Prayer

¹ <http://madtbone.tripod.com/church.htm>

² **Teacher Man: A Memoir** by Frank McCourt, Green Peril Corp., New York. 2005.

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syndrome>