

What Does the Bible Teach About the Law of Unintended Consequences?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

A. We have no control over all of the consequences of our choices - Rom. 6:23

1. "Sin will take you further than you intended to go, cost you more than you intended to pay, and keep you longer than you intended to stay."

B. 2Sam. 11:1-18 - We are all connected and do not have the power to control or limit the effects of our sins on others.

1. David's sin ruined the lives of: Bathsheba, her unborn child, Uriah the Hittite, Joab the captain, the future children of David, the entire nation would have to endure shame of their king's sins as well as a civil war.
2. No man is an island unto himself.
3. Regardless of how insignificant to our attention or unrecognizable to our perception, nothing and no one is completely immune to outside forces.
4. Fiber from your clothes, skins cells and hair from your body fall everywhere. You leave a mark everywhere you go in this world.

C. What is the Law of Unintended Consequences?

1. "In the social sciences, unintended consequences are outcomes that are not the ones foreseen and intended by a purposeful action." (Robert K. Merton)

2. "...The biggest jump in skin cancer has occurred since the advent of sunscreens. The fact is that people, in pursuit of a superficial look of health, give themselves a fatal disease. Reasoning human beings think they have figured out how to beat something, and then it comes right back and kicks them. The irony is impressive: Healthy people, trying to look healthier, make themselves sick. (G. Carlin)

3. Example: Congress instituted regulations mandating that auto manufacturers increase the average "miles per gallon" on their cars to 30 MPG. (CAFÉ Regulation) The good intention was that car makers would improve the fuel economy of their vehicles thereby protecting the environment and using fewer natural resources. It was a good intention. However, instead of improving the technology of the fuel injectors and carburetors and other engine components in an effort to raise the average MPG of their cars, manufacturers reduced the size and lightened the weight of cars. The smaller and lighter cars did measure up to the new standard. But consumers did not want the more fragile and less dependable compacts. As a result the consumers began purchasing vans and pick-up trucks, to which the CAFÉ regulation did not apply. Auto Manufacturers developed the SUV which was also exempt. Today one out of every seven vehicles on the road is a SUV. The "Good Intention" of Congress was to protect the environment and natural resources by improving the fuel economy of vehicles. The "Unintended Consequence" was: manufacturers shrunk the size of cars making them more dangerous and less dependable, consumers flocked to truck-based-vehicles

which use more fuel, 2,000 more people die per year as a result of collisions between SUVs and compact cars than died prior to the CAFÉ ruling. The "Intention" was good but the results have been disastrous.

4. Treaty of Versailles of 1919 - It ended WWI and disarmed Germany and made them take full responsibility for starting the war. Germany was forced to give up territory and pay reparations. However, the unintended consequences of the treaty lead to the rise of the Nazi Party and Hitler.
 5. Email - An efficient, inexpensive way to communicate opens one to the potential danger of hackers, viruses, spyware, identity theft
 6. Aspirin - Intended to be a pain reliever, has also been used as a blood thinner due to its anti-clotting effects. Taken over a long period of time, aspirin can reduce the risk of heart attacks and stroke.
- D. The same Law of Unintended Consequences applies to sin.
1. Paul said, "The wages of sin is death." But people do not sin because they want to die.
 2. People sin to fulfill the desires of their flesh, or for pleasure, or for personal advantage, not to become addicted or suffer harm.
 3. If a person steals, he does so to benefit himself, not to be incarcerated.
 4. If a person commits adultery he does so to please his own desires. Divorce, illegitimacy, and disease are the unintended consequences.
 5. If a person lies he does so to make himself look better in the eyes of others. The unintended consequence is that people no longer trust him.
- E. The Law of Unintended Consequences does not apply only to sin. It also applies to good works.
1. Often, one can differentiate between good and evil by analyzing unintended consequences. Not teaching that the end justifies the means, but what Jesus said: "By their fruits, you shall know them."
 2. Some inadvertently won others to God by their moral manner of life.
 3. Saul's father sent him to the prophet Samuel so that he might find his donkey. Instead Saul was anointed to be the first king over Israel.
 4. Jesse sent David to the battle to check on his brothers. David killed Goliath and delivered Israel.
 5. Good or bad choices, we do not have the power to control all outcomes.

I. LOT DIDN'T MEAN FOR THAT TO HAPPEN

- A. Gen. 13:10-13 - Lot was only looking for a way to support his family and to ensure their future financial security. He did not intend for his choice to destroy his family
1. At some point, Lot became aware that he made a choice that was creating trouble for him - 2Peter 2:7-8

2. He decided to remain anyway, perhaps believing it would work out. He did not intend for his choice to destroy his family.
 3. He was a moral man who chose to live among the most immoral people in the world - Gen. 19:4-9
 4. He was only trying to provide for and protect his family in a fortified city. He did not intend for his choice to destroy his family.
 5. Provide for his family and financial security and provide a protective home for his family in the safety of a city -- these are good things for a man to do for his family. However, he didn't have to go to Sodom to do that. He could have trusted God, Who would have provided those things far better than Lot could in Sodom.
 6. He didn't mean for some of his daughters and sons-in-law to be burned alive in the fall of the city, he didn't mean for his wife to die as a salt pillar, he didn't mean for his two remaining daughters to become so immoral and to commit incest.
 7. He shouldn't have drunk the wine; maybe he did so to help him forget his pain, but it led to the sins with his daughters and the generation of two nations that became mortal enemies of Israel. Lot didn't mean to...
- B. We may be tempted to make choices in the name of popularity, convenience, or financial security, but at what catastrophic and unforeseen cost?
1. Choices we make now can eternally affect our families for generations to come.

II. WHY WE CANNOT CONTROL ALL OUTCOMES

- A. Ignorance, the inability to know every detail and potentiality, makes it impossible to anticipate everything. The "what were you thinking" scenario
- B. Errors in understanding the crisis or question. "That outfit doesn't look good on me." "Well, maybe if you lost some weight."
- C. Following plans and patterns that worked in the past, but do not apply to the current dilemma. Treating a broken bone with hot compresses
- D. Immediate interests overriding long-term interests. Cashing in retirement fund to buy a new car
- E. Self-defeating prophecy or the fear of some imagined consequence often drives people to find solutions before the problem occurs, thus creating a new set of even worse problems than the one that is feared.

III. WHY OUR WAY OFTEN GOES WRONG

- A. When we refuse to consult the Lord and are determined to go our own way, we can expect the following results:

1. Confusion. God's actions at the Tower of Babel demonstrate how He allows confusion to undo when we make decisions apart from Him. Not only were their plans frustrated, but God accomplished His will despite them, as they scattered over the surface of the earth.
 2. Conflict. We'll experience internal conflict, a sense of uneasiness, inadequacy, and doubt over our course of action.
 3. Cost. Disobedience is always costly when we don't do the right thing, in the right time, and in the right way.
 4. Loss. We will experience loss at some point in our lives, and tragically we will be able to blame no one but ourselves.
 5. Regret. God chooses the best direction, time, and way. Therefore, if we go in an opposite direction, don't wait for His timing, or do it our way, we will miss the best outcomes and live with deep regret.
 6. Pain. As we look back at choices, we'll be filled with thoughts: "If only I'd done this or not done that, I wouldn't be hurting today"
 7. Discipline. He often allows us to suffer for our choices in this world, to the end that we will grow. Sadly, many stiffen their necks - Heb. 12:11
- B. "Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful." (Margaret J. Wheatley)
- C. "Good intentions can often lead to unintended consequences." (Tim Walberg)

IV. WHAT DO THE SCRIPTURES SAY?

- A. Gal. 6:7-8 - We are accountable for our choices and all of the outcomes produced by our choices.
- B. Jer. 17:9-10 - Often, we often deceive ourselves about our choices.
- C. Ex. 22:5-6 - God has always held His people responsible for unintended consequences of their choices.
- D. Prov. 25:26 - Bad choices made in compromise with evil by good people destroy their influence.
- E. 2Sam. 12:1-14 - We overlook the pain caused by our unintended consequences, but are enraged by the thoughtlessness of others.
- F. Matt. 27:3-5 - Often, we must live with the pain of unintended consequences.
- G. 1Kings 11:9-11 - Our unintended consequences can hurt multitudes in generations to come.
- H. Jonah 1:1-17 - Often, others are forced to pay for our unintended consequences.
- I. Rom. 5:12; Gen. 3:14-17 - It is possible that the unintended consequences of our choices can impact the world.
- J. 1John 1:10 - Our unintended consequences can affect God's influence through us in this world.

K. Mark 9:43 - It is better to live with a little loss in this world than to deal with long term unintended consequences.

Conclusion:

A. We are free to choose as we will, but we will never be free from the consequences of our choices.