

Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

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Hold Fast to Christ!

(Col 2:2b-3 ESV) to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

“Seek Wisdom as Treasure”

May 12, 2013

Sermon Text: Colossians 3:20-21

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 1

Introduction-

I wanted to begin this morning by commenting a bit further regarding Paul's instruction to fathers –

(Col 3:20-21 ESV) ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

We have the parallel text in Ephesians-

(Eph 6:1-4 ESV) **Ephesians 6:1 ¶** Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Have you ever noticed that the Bible often uses what we might call “understatement”? I think that the Apostle's mention here of “provoking children to discouragement/anger” is an understatement. We all need to understand that when God says something in His Word, He means it and it is always perilous to minimize it. We must hear very carefully when

He speaks. Obedience to His Word is always accompanied by His blessing.

(Psa 1:1-4 ESV) **Psalm 1:1 ¶**
Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.
³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.
⁴ The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

We live in a time and era when things are growing worse – it seems to me anyway. And Scripture warns us of this. One of the signs is that there are sooooo many people around us who are simply non-functional. If you try to find people who are able to function in daily life, to maintain basic relationships, to be productive – givers rather than takers – and who just press on day after day meeting their responsibilities and contributing to society – you find it a bit of a task. More so, I think, than it used to be. This is certainly not because all such people are reaping the harvest of their own sin. Many are suffering because of the sin of others perpetrated upon them.

I was fishing the other day down at Devil’s Lake and 6 or so young people came along and sat down to fish as well. In appearance, they were of the “gang-banger” genre – tattoos all over, waistlines moved down to mid-thigh, rough language – even the females. And, well, - some of them just not socially adept, clueless as to legal fish limits, mostly concerned about bumming cigarettes from one another – and you wonder – how are these young people going to cope in life? How are they going to function? And what happens when children are born to them? [I liked them in a way though. I caught the biggest fish and one of them tried to swap me for it with some of his smaller ones. I teased him about just wanting the bragging rights and he laughed. I really felt sorry for them. Talk about needing Christ!]

Now, very often society points the finger at these kinds of people – losers, misfits, and so on. But did you ever wonder how they got into the situations and thinking patterns they have embraced as a way of life? How does a young child grow up and become – non-functional in life? Angry. Discouraged. Well, let me suggest to you that many of them have been provoked by a parent or parents, precisely as Paul has warned of here. Listen to these facts from Judith Herman, an expert on trauma:

MOST PEOPLE have no knowledge or understanding of the psychological changes (damages) of captivity. [By "captivity," Herman is speaking of ongoing, prolonged trauma of any kind]. *Social judgment of chronically traumatized people therefore tends to be extremely harsh.*

Observers who have never experienced prolonged terror and who have no understanding of coercive methods of control *presume that they would show greater courage and resistance than the victim in similar circumstances.* Hence the common tendency to account for the victim's behavior by seeking *flaws in her personality or moral character.* Prisoners of war who succumb to "brainwashing" are often treated as traitors.' Hostages who submit to their captors are often publicly excoriated. *Sometimes survivors are treated more harshly than those who abused them.*

While it is clear that ordinary, healthy people may become entrapped in prolonged traumatic situations, it is equally clear that *after their escape they are no longer ordinary or healthy.* [Think of those 3 young women in Cleveland!] Chronic trauma causes serious psychological harm. *The tendency to blame the victim,* however, has interfered with the psychological understanding and diagnosis of a post-

traumatic syndrome. Instead of conceptualizing the psychopathology of the victim as a response to an abusive situation, mental health professionals have frequently attributed the traumatic situation to the victim's presumed underlying psychopathology.

The mental health system is filled with survivors of prolonged, repeated childhood trauma. This is true even though most people who have been abused in childhood never come to psychiatric attention. To the extent that these people recover, they do so on their own. While only a small minority of survivors, usually those with the most severe traumatic histories, eventually become psychiatric patients, many or even most psychiatric patients are survivors of childhood abuse. **The data on this point is beyond contention.**

--On careful questioning, 50-60 percent of psychiatric inpatients and 40-60 percent of outpatients report childhood histories of physical or sexual abuse or both.

--In one study of psychiatric emergency room patients, 70 percent had abuse histories.

Thus abuse in childhood appears to be one of the main factors that lead a person to seek psychiatric treatment as

an adult. Survivors of child abuse who become patients appear with a bewildering array of symptoms. Their general levels of distress are higher than those of other patients. Perhaps the most impressive finding is the sheer length of the list of symptoms correlated with a history of childhood abuse.

When survivors of childhood abuse seek treatment, they have what the psychologist Denise Gelinas calls a "disguised presentation." They come for help because of their *many* symptoms or because of difficulty with relationships: problems in intimacy, excessive responsiveness to the needs of others, and repeated victimization. *All too commonly, neither patient nor therapist recognizes the link between the presenting problem and the history of chronic trauma.* Survivors of childhood abuse, like other traumatized people, are frequently misdiagnosed and mistreated in the mental health system. Because of the number and complexity of their symptoms, their treatment is often fragmented and incomplete. Because of their characteristic difficulties in close relationships, they are particularly vulnerable to re-victimization by caregivers. They may become engaged in ongoing, destructive interactions, in which the medical or mental health system

replicates the behavior of the abusive family.

These patients also share characteristic difficulties in close relationships. Interpersonal difficulties have been described most extensively in patients with borderline personality disorder. Indeed, a pattern of intense, unstable relationships is one of the major criteria for making this diagnosis. *Borderline patients find it very hard to tolerate being alone but are also exceedingly wary of others.* Terrified of abandonment on the one hand and of domination on the other, they oscillate between extremes of clinging and withdrawal, between abject submissiveness and furious rebellion.

They tend to form "special" relations with idealized caretakers in which ordinary boundaries are not observed. Psychoanalytic authors attribute this instability *to a failure of psychological development in the formative years of early childhood.* One authority describes the primary defect in borderline personality disorder as a "failure to achieve object constancy," that is, a failure to form reliable and well-integrated inner representations of trusted people." Another speaks of the "relative developmental failure in formation of introjects that provide to the self a function of holding-soothing security"; that is, **people with borderline personality disorder**

cannot calm or comfort themselves by calling up a mental image of a secure relationship with a caretaker.

In borderline personality disorder, my investigations have also *documented histories of severe childhood trauma in the great majority (81 percent) of cases*. The abuse generally began early in life and was severe and prolonged, though it rarely reached the lethal extreme, described by patients with multiple personality disorder. The earlier the onset of abuse and the greater its severity, the greater the likelihood that the survivor would develop symptoms of borderline personality disorders' The specific relationship between symptoms of borderline personality disorder and a history of childhood trauma has now been confirmed in numerous other studies."

Many of the most troubling features of these three disorders become more comprehensible in the light of a history of childhood trauma. *More important, survivors become comprehensible to themselves. When survivors recognize the origins of their psychological difficulties in an abusive childhood environment, they no longer need attribute them to an inherent defect in the self.* Thus the way is opened to the creation of new meaning in experience and a new, unstigmatized identity. Understanding the role of childhood

trauma in the development of these severe disorders also informs every aspect of treatment. This understanding provides the basis for a cooperative therapeutic alliance that normalizes and validates the survivor's emotional reactions to past events, while recognizing that these reactions may be maladaptive in the present. Moreover, a shared understanding of the survivor's characteristic disturbances of relationship and the consequent risk of repeated victimization offers the best insurance against unwitting reenactments of the original trauma in the therapeutic relationship. *The testimony of patients is eloquent on the point that recognition of the trauma is central to the recovery process.*

Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Chapter 6). Kindle Edition.

Fathers (parents) do not provoke your children to anger.

I have no doubt then that we are surrounded by people with backgrounds like this. We live in an evil, porn-fueled world that is actively rebelling against God's Word, and whether we like to think about it or not, many more of the faces of people we see are the faces of people provoked to wrath and discouragement

by their parent or parents through extended, ongoing trauma of all sordid kinds.

The answer for these people is Christ and His truth. Many of them don't even know how all of this evil affected them, as Herman pointed out. The liberating truth is – *it was wrong. It was evil. It was not normal or right. God means good for you and through faith in Christ, by His Spirit and His Word, your mind can be renewed.* There is a new life and a new family and a new way and a new Father offered in the gospel.

And there is *real wisdom* in the Word of God.

(Eph 6:1-4 ESV) **Ephesians 6:1 ¶** Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Did you note the connection by the way of this promise to children and what we read back in Proverbs 1?

(Pro 1:32-33 ESV) ³² For the simple are killed by their turning

away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; ³³ but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster."

This means then that if children are not brought up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, foolishness will be their lot and they won't live securely. They won't be at ease. And this kind of disaster is all around us.

I recently started reading a book by a pastor in New York named Peter Scazzero entitled *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*. He states things that I have been thinking about for a long time. What I believe he means by emotionally healthy spirituality is *wisdom*. God's wisdom. And the point he emphasizes is that in our churches, even in and perhaps especially in churches like ours – conservative Bible-believing churches where God's Word is honored and where truth and accurate doctrine is considered vital – *emotional maturity (wisdom) is lacking*. Knowing facts and details of theology is not the same thing as being wise.

And Scazzero's point relates directly to Colossians 3 instruction for parents in raising up their children. It also relates directly to you and me and adults because *very few of us were privileged to have parents who truly*

brought us up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. That is to say, we were not trained very well in *wisdom*. Even if you had Christian parents, there are usually deficiencies that we need to recognize and face up to.

I will read to you at length in a moment what Scazzero has to say, but let me first just give you a couple of examples of this kind of wisdom (all of which is to be found in God's Word if we can just learn how to look for it) –

The first comes from Dr. George Simon, Jr's new article he wrote for our blog –

*“Very early in my work with survivors of relational trauma I learned some things that shed welcome new light on all the research findings on depression. I have come to believe what is the behavioral ‘formula’ for depression. *Focusing attention and investing time and energy where you don't have power, I have realized, is a sure pathway to frustration, anger, feelings of helplessness, and eventually, depression.**

Contrarily, focusing on what you have power over – namely, your own decisions and actions – and investing your time and energy in those things is the ‘formula’ for personal empowerment and joy. Doing so also

requires that you ‘let go’ of the possible outcomes of your actions, and of people, places, and things you can't possibly control.

“Invest your energy only where you have power.”

For example, you have the power, right, and responsibility to set reasonable expectations for the kinds of behaviors you desire from others. In other words, it is up to you to set and enforce the minimum character standards a person must display to have a relationship with you.”

Isn't that good? And this kind of wisdom is all through Scripture:

(Pro 1:10-16 ESV) ¹⁰ My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.

¹¹ If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason;

¹² like Sheol let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the pit;

¹³ we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder;

¹⁴ throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse"--

¹⁵ my son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths, ¹⁶ for their feet run to

evil, and they make haste to shed blood.

That is wisdom! We can choose our relationships. We can say “no!” But I did not enter into life with that wisdom. In fact in many cases children are raised up and become adults who believe that they must please people. Some of the worst of this kind of thing is found in Christian church life!

Listen then to the lessons Peter Scazzero learned the hard way. How different it would have been for him if he had been instructed in the Lord’s wisdom when he was a child:

Very, very few people emerge out of their families of origin emotionally whole or mature. [i.e., in biblical terms, *wise*]. In my early years of ministry, I believed the power of Christ could break any curse, so I barely gave any thought to how the home I’d left long ago might still be shaping me. [We should know this though, just from Paul’s statement that parents must raise up their children in God’s wisdom and not provoke them to anger and discouragement]. After all, didn’t Paul teach in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that when you become a Christian, old things pass away and all things become new? But crisis taught me I had to go back and understand what those old things were in order for

them to begin passing away. [Those strongholds of false thinking must be EXPOSED first in light of God’s truth].

My Italian-American family, like all families, was cracked and broken. My parents were children of immigrants and sacrificed themselves for their 4 children to enjoy the American dream. My dad, a baker by trade, worked endless hours, first in a New York City Italian pastry shop owned by my grandfather and later for a large baking distributor. His one overriding goal was for his children to study, graduate from college, and ‘make something of their lives.’

My mom struggled with clinical depression and an emotionally unavailable husband. Raised under an abusive father, she suffocated under the weight of raising her 4 children alone. Her married life, like her childhood, was marked by sadness and loneliness.

My siblings and I emerged out of that environment scarred. We were emotionally underdeveloped [ie, not wise] and starved for affection and attention. We each left home for college, trying unsuccessfully not to look back.

From the outside, our home, like so many others, appeared ok. It seemed

better, at least, than most of my friends' situations. The house of cards, however, came tumbling down when I was 16. My older brother broke an invisible rule of our family by disobeying my father and quitting college. Even worse, he announced that Reverend and Mrs. Moon, founders of the Unification Church, were the true parents of humankind. For the next 10 years he was declared dead and forbidden to return home. My parents were ashamed and crushed. They drew back from extended family and friends. The pressure and stress of his dramatic leaving exposed the large craters and holes in our family functioning. We splintered further apart.

It would take us almost two decades to begin recovering.

My family is undoubtedly different from yours. But one thing I've learned after over 20 years of working closely with families is this: *your family, like mine, is also marked by the consequences of our first parents as described in Genesis 3.* Shame, secrets, lies, betrayals, relationship breakdowns, disappointments, and unresolved longings for unconditional love lie beneath the veneer of even the most respectable families.

Disillusioned and unsure of God's existence, by the age of 13 I had left

the church, convinced it was irrelevant to 'real life.' It was through a Christian concert in a small church and a Bible study on our university campus that, by God's grace, I became a Christian. I was 19. The enormity of the love of God in Christ overwhelmed me. I immediately began a passionate quest to know this living Jesus who had revealed himself to me.

For the next 17 years, I plunged headfirst into my new found evangelical/charismatic tradition, absorbing every drop of discipleship and spirituality made available. I prayed and read Scripture. I consumed Christian books. I participated in small groups and attended church regularly. I learned about spiritual disciplines. I served eagerly with my gifts. I gave money away freely. I shared my faith with anyone who would listen.

Following college graduation, I taught high school English for one year and then went to work for 3 years as a staff person with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a Christian ministry serving college students. Eventually this led me to Princeton and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminaries, one year in Costa Rica to learn Spanish, and the planting of a multiethnic church in Queens, New York.

For those first 17 years as a devoted follower of Christ, however, the emotional aspects or areas of my humanity remained largely untouched. They were rarely talked about or touched on in Sunday school classes, small groups, or church settings. In fact, the phrase ‘emotional aspects or areas of my humanity’ seemed to belong in a professional counselor’s vocabulary, not the church.

Just as my leadership ministry seemed to be reaching full swing, Geri, my wife, slowly began to protest that something was desperately wrong – wrong with me and wrong with the church. I knew she might be right so I kept trying to implement different discipleship emphases that, to a certain degree, helped me. My conversation with myself went something like this:

--More Bible study, Pete...

--No, it’s body life...get everyone in deeper levels of community, in small groups. That will do it.

--Spend more time in prayer and schedule more prayer meetings.

--No, these are spiritual warfare issues. The reason people aren’t really changing is you are not confronting the demonic powers in and around them.

--Worship, that’s it!

--No, get them involved in serving among the poor and then they will change.

--Maybe if I pound more into their heads about the grace of God in Christ

But in all of these things, though there is biblical truth in each of them, the relational and interior world is still not in order. The hard work of growing up is bypassed. The people are deceived.

I know. I lived that way for almost 17 years as a Christian. I ignored the reality that signs of emotional immaturity were everywhere in and around me [ie, lack of real wisdom].

Scazzero now describes for us the turning point that shook him to the core and revealed the fact that he was an infant in many very practical ways that had never been touched in his past life. It came through an event that the patriarchalism people would call sinful rebellion on the part of his wife! It wasn’t –

Three things finally dragged me, kicking and screaming, to open up to the notion of emotionally healthy spirituality.

First, I was not experiencing the joy or contentment Scripture promises us in Christ. I was unhappy, frustrated, overworked, and harried. God had brought me into the Christian life with the offer, ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light,’ an invitation to a free

and abundant life. But I wasn't feeling it. After years of being an active Christian, I felt exhausted and in need of a break. *My life was lived more out of reaction to what other people did or might do or what they thought or might think about me.*

Second, I was angry, bitter, and depressed. For 5 years I had attempted to do the work of two or three people. We had two services in English in the morning and one in the afternoon in Spanish. I preached at all of them. When my associate in our afternoon Spanish congregation left the church with 200 of the 250 members to start his own church, I found myself hating him. I tried, without success, to forgive him.

I experienced the growing tension of a double life—preaching love and forgiveness on Sundays and cursing alone in my car on Mondays.

Third, Geri was lonely, tired of functioning as a single mom with our 4 daughters. She wanted more from our marriage and grew frustrated enough to finally confront me. She had finally come to a place where she would not accept my excuses, delays, or avoidant behavior. She had nothing else to lose.

Late one evening, as I was sitting on our bed reading, she entered the room and calmly informed me: 'Pete, I'd be

happier single than married to you. I am getting off this roller coaster. I love you but refuse to live this way anymore. I have waited...I have tried talking to you. You aren't listening. I can't change you. That is up to you. But I am getting on with my life.'

She was resolute: 'Oh yes, by the way, the church you pastor? I quit. Your leadership isn't worth following.'

For a brief moment, I understood why people murder those they love. She had exposed my nakedness. Mostly I felt ashamed. It was almost too much for my weak ego to bear.

Nonetheless, this was probably the most loving thing Geri has done for me in our entire marriage. While she could not articulate it yet at that point, she realized something vital: emotional health and spiritual maturity are inseparable. It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature (ie, unwise). While I sincerely loved Jesus Christ and believed many truths about Him, I was an emotional infant unwilling to look at my immaturity (foolishness). Geri's leaving the church pushed me over the brink to look beneath the surface of my iceberg to depths that were, until this time, too frightening to consider. I finally acknowledged that huge areas of my life remained untouched by Jesus Christ. My

biblical knowledge, leadership position, seminary training, experience, and skills had not changed that embarrassing reality.

Scazzero gives us some examples of infancy/foolishness:

- Inability to distinguish between fact and feeling
- Emotionally needy and highly reactive to others
- Much of life's energy is spent winning the approval of others
- Little energy left for goal-oriented activities
- Little emotional separation from their family of origin
- Dependent marriage relationship
- Handle transitions, crises and life adjustments poorly
- Inability to see where they end and others begin (boundary ignorance)

Conclusion

So what are we saying?

“We all need to acknowledge that very few of us, if any, truly grew up in a family where the real wisdom of the Lord was known and thoroughly taught and passed on to children. That there resides in us much foolishness and that we very much

need to grow up in God's wisdom. This wisdom will enable us to:

1. Manage our own feelings and emotional life instead of denying them or letting them run out of control.
2. Initiate and maintain meaningful and close relationships.
3. Identify the self-destructive (foolish) patterns in our lives and break free of them.
4. Admitting and understanding with more clarity how our past has shaped our present, for good or ill.
5. Accurately measuring our own strengths and limits and becoming able to communicate those limits to others.
6. Developing an ability to deal wisely with conflict and resolve it where possible.

How do we do this? Well, I think that it is best done with the help of trusted friends who know us well. And they need to be wise friends who are able to help us. People who are growing in wisdom and knowledge of the Lord themselves. Warning: This will require some priority setting on your part. Some things you are doing you will probably have to put on hold. But it is worth it. Definitely worth it –

(Proverbs 3:1-8 ESV) My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments,² for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.³ Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.⁴ So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.⁸ It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.