

Old Testament lesson – Hosea 11:1-11
New Testament lesson – Luke 12:13-21

Difficult Children

Last month, you might remember that on the 4th of July weekend I used “America the Beautiful” for special music. It was the Ray Charles version, which is featured in the movie, “The Sandlot.” I mentioned that I would probably watch the movie later, which I did.

If case you have not seen the movie, it is narrated by the adult version of the boy who is the central figure in the story, Scotty Smalls. Young Scotty is a bit of a nerd, and early in the movie his mother expresses her desire for him to make friends in the town where they have recently relocated. Rather than sitting alone in his room, building complex devices with his Erector set, she wants him to go outside, run and play, scrape up his knees, and even get into trouble. Apparently, she found it difficult to have a child who was never in trouble at all.

It seems hard to believe that any parent would find such a perfectly-behaved child difficult to deal with. But if it means that they have no social skills, it might be easier to understand. So she wanted him to make friends, even if it meant getting into trouble.

We never had to tell our boys to do that. They knew instinctively how to find trouble. According to my wife, they must have inherited that ability from me, as she was never in trouble as a child except when her siblings framed her for their misdeeds. But a couple of our sons far surpassed me, so she must have contributed some of their ability. I was probably more like Scotty Smalls than she thinks, but it’s easier to cause trouble with a chemistry set than an Erector set, which does not burn or smell bad.

Many years ago I saw a video series by James Dobson called “The Strong-willed Child.” He made the interesting assertion that

children are born with a personality already in place. It changes and develops as the child grows, but the child arrives with a head start on the parents. And according to Dobson, children are generally either strong-willed or compliant, right from the get-go.

Both strong-willed children and compliant children have positive and negative aspects from a parent’s vantage point. A strong-willed child might resist their parents to an unpleasant degree, but they might also be more able and willing to resist peer pressure to misbehave. Conversely, a compliant child might go along with their parents’ wishes more readily, but other people might also be more able to bend them in the *wrong* direction.

No matter what personality type or trait you think of in a child, it can present some difficulty to parents.

Ephraim is another name sometimes used for Israel, who was God’s child. Sometimes the Scriptures describe God as a father to his people, and other times a maternal image is used. Similarly, both male and female imagery are used to represent God’s people. In this morning’s OT lesson, Israel is clearly spoken of as a son. Most commentators indicate God is depicted as a father in this passage, based on a couple of masculine word forms. Otherwise, this could just as easily describe a mother’s love and anger for her child.

Regardless of whether we think this is a paternal or maternal image, God is described as the loving parent of a rebellious, disobedient child. The first couple of verses sum up what has happened over the years. When the nation of Israel first went to Egypt they were not really a nation yet. They were

Jacob's family and household. It was during their time in Egypt that they grew to be a great nation. When they left for the Promised Land they had to learn to walk with God. He led them through the wilderness with "cords of compassion," yet he also had to discipline them for various incidents, such as the golden calf.

Once they became established in the land of their home, God still had to put up with their periodic decline into idolatry. Consequently, says Hosea, the nation will soon go back to slavery. The nation will fall to Assyria and be led away into captivity. I'm not sure why the translation I used said Ephraim would return to Egypt; there is a negative term in the Hebrew, indicated in other translations: "They shall *not* return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king."

As a loving parent, God is distressed by this development. He is emotionally torn and tormented by the necessity of punishing Israel for his transgressions. He simply can not give up his people forever. He will eventually bring them home; he will not destroy them. If a human father or mother had a child as disobedient and incorrigible as Israel, they might disown them completely and for ever. But God is not a man. He is the Holy One in the midst of his people, and his love and mercy are as infinite as his holiness.

Israel will come home again, trembling like frightened birds. Here we see God's great advantage over human parents. He knows how his discipline will turn out. Human parents never know. We do not know how severe or how lenient to be in order to make children turn out the way they should. But God knows beforehand how things will go.

We human parents may also have an advantage that God does *not* enjoy. Our children eventually grow up. For the most part, we can let them go and allow them to make their own way. We may still worry about them, we may find it necessary to help them out, but they become independent of us. As Scripture says, "a man shall *leave his father and mother*" when he takes

a wife. At least, that is the biblical model. Many families remain closely connected, and there is nothing wrong with that. But once the children have spouses of their own, the husband-wife relationship takes precedence over the parent-child relationship.

It is different with God. His children never seem to grow up. Of course, Scripture also speaks of our relationship with God as a marriage. But in the OT that is usually used to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness. In the NT the bride of Christ presents a more positive image.

Still, God's children are constantly displaying their immaturity. Our NT lesson begins with an example of that. Jesus has just finished teaching about some important ideas: avoiding the attitudes of the Pharisees, being more concerned about spiritual matters than physical, and acknowledging Jesus as the Christ and trusting God when one is persecuted for that acknowledgement. In fact, it could be that he had not really finished when someone bursts out, "Teacher, make my brother give me my share of our inheritance."

Talk about childish behavior. When I was teaching, I would sometimes finish some point or show how to work a certain type of problem, and then a student would ask me how to do the very thing I had just shown them. Tell me you weren't paying attention without telling me you weren't paying attention.

This man strikes me as someone who was not really paying attention as Jesus was speaking. So Jesus shuts him down with a question, then he proceeds to use the man as an object lesson: Beware of covetousness. Your life is not defined by the possessions you have. He tells a parable to illustrate further.

It's been a while since I have seen one on a car, but I used to see a bumper sticker that said, "He who dies with the most toys wins." What a stupid idea. As everyone knows, you can't take it with you. Someone came up with a response on another bumper sticker: "He who dies with the

most toys still dies.” This parable of Jesus seems to side with the second bumper sticker and unequivocally refutes the first one.

I checked to see if those bumper stickers are still available. Ironically, “He who dies with the most toys wins” costs \$4.08, and “He who dies with the most toys still dies” costs \$18.27. I guess the idea is, since you can’t take it with you, might as well spend it on our bumper sticker.

Even though the rich man died with brand new barns full of grain, he still died. He never had the opportunity to enjoy his wealth. Perhaps the ultimate irony of this parable is that he died after telling his *soul*, his consciousness, mind and will and intellect, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years.” This man confused his physical well-being with his spiritual well-being.

Based on the rest of the parable, we might conclude that this rich man had done nothing to prepare himself to meet his Maker. It would seem his soul had not laid up anything for the future. God calls him a fool, and Jesus warns about collecting wealth for oneself without being rich towards God. This is where I think God’s American children are unimaginably difficult.

It’s not the only area where we are difficult children, nor is it the most widely discussed. When it is discussed, it is seldom from a fully Biblical point of view. We might still hear people talk about the greed of the so-called “one-percenters,” but little or nothing is said about covetousness. But it was Jesus’ warning about covetousness that led into this parable.

Covetousness occurs at all socioeconomic levels of our society. It’s why people demand the wealthy or the government give them money. It’s what our economy is based on. It’s the economic foundation of television and movies. Virtually every paying TV commercial or product placement in a movie is designed to make viewers want something they don’t have yet. It may be as cheap and simple as a can of soda, or it may be expensive and elaborate – a cruise, a luxury car, or a trip to Disney World. Some of

you probably read publications I don’t read which carry ads designed to make you covet bigger, faster, more advanced, more expensive farm machinery.

As a result of this promotion of covetousness, the people of America often borrow money to obtain what they covet. That has helped drive personal debt through the roof. In total, American consumers owe \$18.2 trillion, including more than \$1 trillion in credit card debt, almost \$13 trillion in mortgages, and nearly \$2 trillion dollars in student loans. It’s no wonder Americans are so tolerant of our government spending far more than it takes in.

Covetousness is insidious. It worms its way into our subconscious and drives us in ways we don’t even recognize. In our society it is an acceptable sin. Indeed, it is a necessary sin for our economy to work.

Covetousness is the reason capitalism is the most functional of all economic systems. Capitalism depends on human sinfulness, and sinfulness is extremely dependable in some ways.

From a biblical point of view, socialism or even communism might be the desired economic system. We should want to help each other; we should want to share our blessings with others who are less fortunate. This is not a seasonal concept limited to Christmas. It’s the way we should live year-round. But we are selfish and self-centered and covetous, so we don’t really, completely live that way.

Well, what if the more fortunate among us did live that way? If we all shared all our wealth, some people would just quit working. Others would lie about what they had available to share. Both of these problems occurred and were addressed in the NT. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for holding back some of their property and then lying about it. Paul said of those in Thessalonica who relied on others to provide for them, “If any one will not

work, let him not eat.” It must have been a problem there.

Many times I have heard someone say they wished the Church today could be like it was in NT times. Maybe they mean the miracles, because the people were not much different. Even in the NT Church, which some Christians tend to romanticize as a perfect, ideal implementation of Christ’s teachings, sinfulness prevented perfect sharing and perfect participation in the community of faith. In the 20th century, communism failed, not simply because it rejected faith and religion, but because it ignored a fundamental truth of Judaeo-Christian teaching: people are sinful. Most people will not voluntarily put the needs of others or of the state before their own. So the regimes that sought to implement communism became totalitarian states, trying to force compliance. That approach has failed miserably in the past, and it still does.

We are difficult children. We could sit in the presence of Christ himself as he is teaching, and sooner or later our minds would wander, and we would think about how nice it would be to have a new car or a better phone or new carpet or a bigger combine. We might find ourselves interrupting Jesus and asking him to help us settle a dispute with a sibling over an inheritance. We have no room to judge that anonymous man whom Jesus rebuked with a parable.

I suppose this sermon is about three things: covetousness, stewardship, and idolatry. For American Christians these things are all joined at the hip, so to speak. They are inseparable, for they frequently occur together.

Covetousness may be the most common part of the sinful human nature that plagues us. Paul uses this particular sin to illustrate his point about how the Law of Moses makes us aware of sin. It is the last of the Ten Commandments: you shall not covet your neighbor’s house, wife, servants, ox, ass, or *anything* that is your neighbor’s.” It is a very broad, all-inclusive

commandment; there are a lot of things we can covet.

But the commandment against coveting and the warning of Jesus do not mean we should possess nothing in this life. I don’t even think it means we should not work hard with goals in mind. It does mean that we must be good stewards of all that God has entrusted to us: time, wealth, abilities, relationships, and so on. Keep our priorities straight; don’t let material possessions – ours or someone else’s – become an idol. Do not fall into worshipping anything but the LORD God. Only God should be the central focus and foundation of our life. Don’t transfer the idolatrous mistakes of Hosea’s contemporaries to the modern idols of material wealth.

Today’s lessons admonish us to grow up and not be such difficult children in God’s family. Being mature in our faith means we must not be like children who become excited over every new toy or game their eyes fall upon. It means growing past the childish notion that life must be “fair,” that others should not have more than us or that those who do have more than us are obligated to share it with us. Being mature in our faith means placing greater emphasis on spiritual matters and less on the material.

But not being difficult children is, well, difficult. It’s difficult not to be difficult. Fortunately we have the Lord’s Table to assist us in this. We celebrate what we call a meal, yet no one could look at the physical items we consume and call it a meal. By no stretch of the imagination could a small piece of bread and a tiny glass of juice or wine satisfy even the slightest physical hunger or thirst.

Nevertheless, it is a feast for the spirit when we come to this table in faith. Contemplating what God has done for us in Jesus Christ feeds our spirits beyond what we could ask or think. Proclaiming the Lord’s death for us reminds us of the value God places on us.

Jesus did not die so that we can fill our lives with things, but so we could fill our lives with him, and becoming full of him spill out onto others whose lives are still empty, regardless of whether the world counts them as rich or poor.

For those who do not have Christ can not be rich towards God. Let us celebrate this wealth from God, the wealth that increases as we give it away. Amen.