



Gleaning Life's Lessons

As I look back at my college years, I realize that significant lessons were gleaned outside the lecture hall. These life lessons were learned in the dorm room (developing relationships with people very different from myself), on the soccer field (growing in discipline and loyalty) and in the arena of student government (honing leadership skills). Many of my life's best and hardest lessons were learned beyond the four walls of a classroom.

Faith is like that, as well. Most applications of the profound truths of God are not learned in a church or a seminary. Rather, they are encountered:

- In a hospital during the birth of a child or in the death of a loved one.
- In the midst of betrayal or financial crisis.
- At that moment when we are tempted to compromise our faith or our values.

Henri Nouwen, the well-known psychologist and author, exemplified this in his own life. Although he had taught at prestigious universities such as Yale, Harvard and Notre Dame, he learned great spiritual lessons serving the mentally handicapped in L'Arche, an international network of communities. His work with these people enabled him to share deep spiritual truths in his writings that could not have been learned at a university.

Jesus taught his disciples great spiritual truths through sermons and parables, but He gave His disciples ample opportunity to learn through the common tasks of life. In the midst of storms and unsuccessful fishing expeditions, the disciples experienced lessons of faith in tangible and unforgettable ways. We have much to learn in church this week, but many of the great lessons of faith will occur Monday through Saturday. What will God teach us today about faith in the challenges we will encounter?

"I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw."
(Proverbs 24:32)



A Life Transformed by Mercy

An act of mercy changed me in high school. Let's open the scene in my high school algebra class. An unannounced quiz caught me by surprise, and I knew little or nothing on the test. In a moment of desperation, I cheated by copying the answers of the person in front of me. Since the answers could be derived by multiple methods, I was easily caught when only two papers in the class were the same – the person's in front of me and mine. That afternoon after school, my algebra teacher pulled me aside from playing in an extracurricular sport. He indicated that he knew I had cheated and that he had the right to flunk me for the whole semester and to tell my parents. Instead, he said that he would only flunk me for that particular exam and would not tell my parents. He continued by saying that he expected me to learn from this experience and to never cheat again. He said that he had confidence in me in spite of what I had done and looked forward to what was ahead for me. Never again did I cheat; because, when tempted, I remembered the mercy shown by my algebra teacher. It left me with a profound understanding of how mercy, shown with great love and expectation, can encourage people to change.

Jesus illustrates this undeserved forgiveness in a parable about mercy. He tells us of a servant who owes the king a great deal of money. As a result of the servant's pleas, the king forgives the entire debt. However, the mercy shown by the king has little impact on the heart of this servant. For, after being relieved of this great debt, the servant demands payment of a small debt that another man owes him. When the debtor is unable to pay, the servant has him thrown into prison. (Matthew 18:21–35). This is an unfortunate example of someone who was not transformed through an encounter with mercy.

Mercy shown in love and with great expectation can be life transforming. It is the essence of the Father's forgiveness through Christ Jesus. What is our response to this gift of mercy? Is there someone in your life who needs the love of Jesus shown through you by an act of mercy?



Our Feelings or God's Character

I am a moody man – always have been. This is advantageous when my mood is upbeat and I feel encouraged. But when I am pessimistic and discouraged, the effect is less pleasant. Medically, we see the important role our emotional life plays in our physical well-being. Intense emotional experiences affect our blood pressure, pulse and breathing patterns. Loneliness is proven to have a dramatic negative impact on our health. Laughter, on the other hand, is recognized for its health benefits. Our emotions touch every area of our lives – our relationships, our self-esteem, our work and even our spiritual lives.

However, our emotions are often a poor barometer of what is real in life. When my relationship with my wife Pamela is based on my feelings, there is an undulating quality that depends on which wave I am riding – up or down. I am so grateful that our marriage is based, not on feelings, but on our commitment before God and to each other. This provides the solid anchor that keeps us secure in the midst of the storms.

When it comes to my relationship to God, I often depend too much upon my feelings to determine the strength of my connectedness to Him. How dangerous! Our bond with God is not determined by our emotions but on His unchanging attributes and promises.

In commenting on his sense of spiritual dryness, a friend sent me these wise words:

“Nothing about my relationship with God changes day to day, at least from His point of view. He still loves me the same as always, He still forgives me and assures me of His love and of eternal life. He still is ready to feed me from His bread and to quench my thirst from His fountain. And He does these things whether I have a feeling that matches His actions and attitudes or not!”

Isn't it comforting to know that our relationship with God is not dependent on our fluctuating feelings, but rather on His unwavering character and constant faithfulness? He declares, “I, the Lord, do not change.” (Malachi 3:6) Neither will His love for us falter. For he says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” (Jeremiah 31:3)

Whether we feel like it or not, God's promises remain true, and we may confidently rest in the promises of His unchanging character.