

October 16, 2011
I Corinthians 3:10-17 / Matthew 7:24-27 / Luke 14:25-30
Life Lessons Series (#4) - Do It Right The First Time

This Sunday, I'd like to return to my Life Lessons Series of Messages and preach my third message in the series. A message I've entitled: "Do It Right The First Time."

It's a lesson that comes from having to do something (on my vacation this past August) which I never intended to have to do. In fact, when I discovered the problem / and all the extra work it would require to fix it / I went in the house / brought the twins outside / showed them what I found / explained why it all happened / and then said to them: "Girls, this is why we always need to do things right the first time."

And here's "the rest of the story" as Paul Harvey used to say, or the details you will need to know in order to understand the rest of this message. Every summer I do a project around my house. One year I finished the basement / the next I put in a full bath on the first floor / the next I redid the kitchen, etc. I like doing it. It relaxes me.

So this year, back in April or May, I decided this year's project would be to make my back porch bigger. And in my planning, I estimated that the time it would take to complete the job, would be about 2 weeks. Which I felt was more than enough time to do what I wanted to do.

But then, when I began tearing off the old deck I noticed ants (lots of big black ants) coming out from behind the 2x10 used to attach the old porch to the house. And when I took off the board to investigate, I discovered that the piece of coated aluminum flashing, which the builder should have put over the board to divert the water away from the house, did just the opposite.

They had apparently used a scrap piece of flashing that did not cover the board, and thus the rain water (for the past 18 years!) had been going down into the sill of the house and caused it to rot.

So, because the original builders (who ended up going bankrupt) didn't spend an extra \$5-\$10 when they built the house 18 years ago / it took me almost a week and a half / and \$100+ in materials / to remove and replace twelve feet of that sill with a new pressure treated 2 x 10 and vinyl coated flashing.

And the whole time I was repairing it, and wasting the last two weeks of my vacation on something I shouldn't have had to do, it reminded me of the lesson my dad drilled into me growing up: ***"Don't cut corners. It's better to do it right the first time, than to have to do it all over again."***

And interestingly, when my neighbor came over to see what I was doing, he said they did the same thing at his house -- except that he ended up having to hire someone to fix it.

So what are the spiritual lessons we can learn? **FIRST** we can learn that the exact same thing is true in our Christian walk. Some of you met Gary, my good friend from Westport, MA who visited here not long ago. Gary is a case in point. Not because he failed to "do it right the first time," but because the church he grew up in dropped the ball and didn't do it right the first time.

Gary did not grow up in a Christian home. His family did go to church on occasion, but neither of his parents were converted, both struggled with alcohol, fought all the time, and paid little or no attention to him and his brother.

Yet, at the age of twelve, when he was watching TV one night, he came across a channel where an evangelist was preaching, and right there, on that night, he experienced the new birth. He trusted in Christ, and resolved to live his life as a follower of Jesus.

The evangelist, he said, encouraged anyone who had truly trusted in Christ to get involved in a local church where he or she could be discipled and grow in the faith.

So, on that Sunday, with the excitement that's so common among the newly converted, he went to the Methodist Church his family occasionally attended / asked the pastor if he could speak with him / went into the pastor's office / told him of how he had been born again / or, as he put it, "had asked Jesus into his heart" / and now needed someone to help him grow.

And the sad part is this: Gary said the pastor simply stared at him / politely listened to his story / said nothing in response / and never mentioned it again or did anything about it. In the months to come he acted as if Gary had never even spoken with him.

He gave no words of encouragement. / Did not pray with him. / He said nothing like, "What a blessing! That's great. Let's hook you up with someone who can help you get grounded in the basics." None of that. Just a blank stare. Which to a 12 year old boy is about the same as saying that what he had experienced was not in any way as important as he'd thought it was.

And thus Gary (who earnestly wanted to be discipled in his newly found faith) was left to do it on his own -- which rarely ever goes well for someone who is only twelve!

He did get involved in the youth group, but there were no lessons / no Bible studies / no prayer. Just a time to play games and have fun. (No different, he said, than the Boy Scouts which he was also involved in.)

That Pastor, my friends, dropped the ball. That pastor had the opportunity to either teach Gary the Scriptures / and how to understand them / and apply them to his life / and how to pray / or find someone who could.

Someone who could lay a good / strong / solid / biblical foundation in his life -- early on in his life -- that would sustain Gary during his turbulent teen years and beyond. But he didn't. He didn't do anything.

So, after finding no affirmation or encouragement whatsoever / no mentors to help him grow in the faith / or anyone in the church who showed interest in helping him grow as a Christian / he entered high school and began to drift from his initial commitment.

And then, he graduated from high school and went off to fight in Vietnam (serving as a medic), where he became addicted to pot and drifted away even further.

Yet God has His ways of bringing His wayward and straying sheep back into the fold. Because one day, as he was rushed across a rice paddy to help wounded marines during a firefight he slipped and fell backward. And as he did, he said, an enemy bullet whizzed by his head so closely, that (quote) ***"I felt the air which the bullet displaced as it whizzed by my nose."***

If he had not slipped at that exact moment, he said, he would have been dead. And later, when he had time to ponder that event, he realized that Someone had spared his life. And it made him remember that night, in front of that TV set, when at 12 years old he committed his life to Christ.

And the struggle didn't end there. He came back from Vietnam / got a job at a hospital as a nurse / and was arrested for stealing drugs from the hospital dispensary to feed his addiction -- a felony charge that carried a sentence of ten years and would mean losing his nursing license.

Yet for some inexplicable reason, when the State Cop came to his hearing, he had reduced the charges to a misdemeanor. Gary was to get involved in a sobriety group and was able to keep his nursing license. Again, he saw the hand of God, and this time, he got right with God.

In fact, he was one of my biggest helpers, and the person I trained for eldership when I was there in Westport (and he just retired after 40 years in nursing).

You see, the foundation you lay early on in your Christian walk, at the time of your conversion / or shortly thereafter / makes all the difference in the world in terms of what your walk will be like years later.

It sets the course for what your spiritual goals will be / whether you'll stand firm under affliction / whether you'll know God's general will for you in any given situation / whether the truths of the Gospel have been sunk like cement columns into the bedrock of your soul / or thrown together in a shabby fashion without digging down at all!

You see, when I studied engineering, one of my professors asked us if we knew how far out of level a 1600 foot building would be if the foundation was off level

by only an 1/8th of an inch at the base (and kept going that way without compensating for it). That is, off level by slightly more than the thickness of a quarter!

And the answer? (Any of you math whizzes want to take a guess)? If a building that high is off by 1/8th of an inch at the bottom, and no one made adjustments for it on the way up, it would be leaning by 16 and a half feet at the top!

Not exactly the type of building I'd want to be in on a calm day / never mind a day when a storm blows in and gale force winds beat down upon it!

All that to say that the spiritual foundation you lay early on in your Christian life, does make a difference. It's important that it be laid right.

Jesus stressed that in the "Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders." The wise man does it right. He digs down until he hits bedrock, and lays his foundation on that rock, and the rains come and the rivers rise, and the winds blow against that house, but it does not fall because it was "built upon the rock."

Yet the foolish man cuts corners. He wanted to save time and money, so he "builds his house on the sand." And the rains come and the rivers rise, and the winds beat against that house, and it falls, because it was simply built on top of the sand. Saved time and money initially, but cost him everything later on.

I have another friend who lives in Louisiana who makes a living off of people who don't do it right the first time. He works for a man who is a millionaire. You know how he made his millions? He gets hired (at the cost of anywhere from \$20,000 to \$50,000 per house, to raise houses that have sunk at one end into the ground.

In one house, he said, if he simply let a bowling ball roll across the floor from one side to the other, it would have damaged the far wall! It was that far out of level. So he digs under the foundation / jacks up the houses with big hydraulic jacks / pours cement columns 10-15 feet deep (or until he hits something solid) / and then sets the house back down.

What would have cost the homeowner a couple thousand extra dollars initially, and made sure it never tilted later, ends up costing them \$20-\$50,000!

Why? Because the builders didn't do it right the first time or they were too cheap to do it right the first time (it's not always the builder!)

What about you? Are you struggling from not having built a good spiritual foundation initially? / Did you take the time to do it, and do it well? Or has time revealed that maybe you cut corners you shouldn't have cut (to save time, and avoid the work involved in developing good spiritual disciplines until they become habits? / Are cracks starting to show and the need for extensive repair becoming apparent?

And don't hear me wrong. You can correct it now. But it usually takes more work to repair work done poorly the first time, than to build it well initially. The foundations we lay early in life (or in the early days of our spiritual life) are usually the most influential in forming who we become.

It's the same with kids. They say that the first six years of a child's life are the most important in terms of their formation and development. And the same is true for us as Christians in the spiritual realms.

And it's not that we can't make those needed repairs. By the grace of God it's NEVER too late to grow! In fact, growing in Christ needs to be a lifelong passion for every believer.

There is NEVER a time in the Christian's life when we can say, "I know it all. I'm all set. I don't need to learn anything else or grow in any area." That day will never come -- not so long as you live on this earth!

So, whether you're repairing work that wasn't done well / or simply seeking to "grow in the grace and knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (as Scripture admonishes every single believer) -- we need to do it well / and do it with all earnestness / knowing that what we build into ourselves today is going to become the foundation for years to come.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** and LAST lesson. That Scripture is filled with admonitions and commands encouraging us to do to do everything we do as if we are doing it unto the Lord Himself.

It's not just in our spiritual lives that we are to work at building well the first time. In fact, it's probably best (and even dangerous to our growth as Christians) to speak in terms of the "spiritual life" -- as if it was somehow disconnected from the way we live the rest of life or do everything else we do in life!

Paul says in I Corinthians 10:31, when speaking of something as normal and seemingly mundane or "unspiritual" as eating and drinking: ***"So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God."***

Listen: Everything in life -- regardless of what it is -- is an opportunity to glorify God.

I'll never forget my mother coming to me one time, when I was a teenager, and telling me how she had just heard a minister preaching. He had used this text as the basis for his message and had said: *"Even cleaning a toilet, or washing a floor, or making a bed, or helping a neighbor, becomes an act of worship and a chance to glorify God, if you do it 'as unto the Lord.' Nothing in life is insignificant or unimportant If you do it for His glory."*

It changed the whole way she looked at doing chores around the house, she said, and especially things she didn't like to do -- like cooking (my mother always disliked cooking and still does).

Knowing that if she did it for HIM, and did it for HIS glory (as a way to worship Him and honor Him) it made doing it so much less of a burden -- and even made it a joy!

I know many books say, "Do it for your husband or for your wife." "Do it for your kids." Or, "Do it for yourself."

But the Bible doesn't say that! It says, ***"In whatsoever you do, do it ALL for the glory of GOD."***

It says, "**Honor God with your body.**" / It says, "**And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.**" / It says, "**Whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, and not for man, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.**"
 (I Cor. 6:20 / Col. 3:17 / Col. 3:23-24)

I even overheard one pastor counseling a man regarding their marriage. The man said: *"I'm struggling. I know I need to love her, and I do want to make it work -- for her -- but I'm just having such a hard time."*

And after a few more such comments, my pastor friend stopped him and said very pointedly: **"No _____, you need make it work for Jesus sake. If you do it for her, you'll only do it as long as she isn't upsetting you, or as long as she does what you think she should be doing. So don't do it for her, do it for Jesus. Love her for Jesus sake. Make the marriage work for His honor and His glory."**

He was right, you know. Too much counseling and too much advice (even in Christian circles) is too man-centered. It's all geared at doing what we do for others / or doing it for us / whereas the Bible says we are to do it all for Jesus -- for HIS sake / and HIS glory / and HIS honor / as if we are doing it all for HIM and HIM alone.

That's God-centered living and God-centered motivation, and that's what we need more than anything else. That way, whether it's appreciated or not appreciated / Whether it's noticed or not noticed / whether its criticized or not criticized -- it doesn't really matter!

Because in the ultimate sense, as Paul says in Rom. 14:8, **"If we live, we live to the Lord."** We're not really doing everything we do for others, with an eye toward how they'll respond, were doing it for God! It's simply to please Him.

And thus, all that really matters is that we are doing it for Jesus, or to please Jesus, or as an act of worship that honors and glorifies Jesus. We are not to be man-pleasers, but God-pleasers.

And in closing let me throw in a disclaimer. I know our culture is into "excellence." It's a big buzz word. That is, perfect and flawless performances. It doesn't matter what effort a person puts in, or the desire they had in their heart.

It only matters how it turned out and how flawless the performance was. We see it in sports, in movies, in dancing and singing competitions, and even, unfortunately, even in churches -- where that secular ideal has also gained a foothold.

Yet, as Scripture states, ***"Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart."*** I even mentioned to someone just the other night, ***"I'd rather see someone do something with all their heart, or with their heart in the right place, and do it less than perfectly, than to see someone do it perfectly for all the wrong reasons."***

I say that because I don't want to give you the impression that "doing things right the first time" means you have to do perfectly or else. That's NOT what I'm saying! This is not a "gain favor with God by trying harder" message.

We ARE to try to do things well and not shabbily or sloppily / and we are to do them with all our hearts and not half-heartedly or irreverently / and yes, we are to do them as unto the Lord and not as unto people.

But that doesn't mean we must do them perfectly and flawlessly or not bother doing them at all -- since true perfection is beyond the reach of any sinner.

Our Father in heaven accepts the things we offer to Him in Christ. NOT because of the perfection they are done with, but because they are done for Him and by faith in Christ.

We ARE to do everything ***"as unto the Lord,"*** and thus with earnestness and integrity. And we are to seek to do them well. God deserves that much from us.

But what makes our offerings pleasing to God, is NOT how close we come to perfection in our performance, but that all our offerings (just like us as people) are offered to Him with the eye of faith gazing at the atoning work of Christ, and thus washed in the blood of Jesus -- which ALONE makes any of my efforts acceptable to God.