

October 2, 2011

John 17:20-23 / Ephesians 4:1-6 / I Thess. 5:12-15

Life Lesson Series (#2) - The Body of Christ and the Lesson of the Bicycle

Last week I started our Life-Lesson Series of messages by sharing what gardening / or caring for my lawn has taught me about the spiritual life -- about pulling up the weeds of sin and cultivating the fruit of godliness.

And I tried to point out how gardening confirms the two things the Scriptures call us to do continually: **"Put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"** (that's cultivating flowers - Eph. 4:24) / and at the same time, **"Put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature -- sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed which is idolatry."** (That's pulling up the weeds -- Col. 3:5)

"Rid yourselves," Paul says, **"of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, lying and filthy language from our lips"** (that weed killing - Col. 3:8) / and **"put on the new self which is being renewed in the image of its Creator."** (That's nurturing fruit - Col. 3:10)

And it's never enough to do just one. We must do both at the same time / and do them on a regular basis / if we want the garden of our soul to be beautiful and not overrun with the weeds of sin.

And moving on to today, what I'd like to do is switch gears a bit (no pun intended!) and share with you the many spiritual lessons I've learned by riding my 21 speed bike from my house in Quakertown to the church and back.

Because I believe Spurgeon was right: Nearly every activity in life has the potential to serve as a spiritual lesson / or an illustration of some biblical truth / if we have our minds trained to look for them. How could it be otherwise if the Bible is true, and God (as Creator) has left His divine imprint upon the creation!

So, what does riding a bike to church have to tell us about the Christian life and unity in the Body of Christ? And the answer? Quite a bit! **FIRST**, riding my bike made me realize that the lessons we learn in life depend in great measure upon the road we chose to travel on in life.

The first time I rode my bike to church I followed what I call the back way -- by the Freshman Center in Quakertown, and down Old Bethlehem Pike be-hind Lowe's, past Paletown Road, and then straight on from there until I took a left on Three Mile Run Road, going up Schoolhouse Road to Ridge Road and on to the church.

And in that one trip I learned this important lesson: *I was lucky to make it in to church alive!* Old Bethlehem Pike is not all that wide / a little windy at points / with a lot of traffic / and people that travel at a pretty good clip (50 mph or faster if the police radar they put up for a few weeks is accurate)!

And not only that, the white lines that are painted on each side of the road leave you only about six to eight inches (sometimes even less) that you can ride on without being in the way of the cars.

I learned that some drivers are very courteous. They slow down, and go out around you. One lady even came to a stop, waited till all the traffic coming the other way had passed, and then passed me in the empty on-coming lane. Not irritated, just cautious (maybe even a bit overly cautious).

Yet one other driver -- a man in a pickup truck -- sped by without slowing down or pulling out at all and nearly clipped my left arm with his mirror. If there was even six inches between his truck and my arm, I would be surprised. He either didn't see me / did see me and didn't care / or he felt he had the right of way and I shouldn't be on his road.

And of course there was the car full of teenagers that went by and yelled something (though I have no idea what).

And what did I learn from all that? I learned that biking on certain roads / where there's a lot of traffic / and people travel fast / and you have no space on the side of the road / can be very dangerous / and thus it would be best not to travel on them.

And that's where the spiritual lesson comes in. Because we all know -- sometimes from personal experience and other times by observation -- that some people choose to travel down roads in life that are not safe / and they should not be traveling on.

INITIALLY the road doesn't seem unsafe, just as initially I didn't think Old Bethlehem Pike would be unsafe. But then something happens (like that truck that almost hit me, could have shattered my arm or landed me in the hospital).

God graciously gives us little hints or strong indicators that it would be better and safer and wiser and much more relaxing not to continue traveling down the road we've chosen to travel on.

Some of you may be in that place right now. It may be a road that's dangerous / and filled with potholes / which could send you swerving out into oncoming traffic at just the wrong time.

Or it may be a road that will lead you straight into temptation. A road you think (in your present state of spiritual vitality or youthful invincibility) that you can handle.

You see the warning signs. You know it's dangerous. But you feel you can handle it. It won't take you down. You've got it all under control. You're convinced of it.

God has shown you the potential dangers, but against good judgment or godly common sense, you think you can handle it. And so you keep on traveling on that dangerous road to temptation and set yourself up for needless struggle and failure.

I've seen many Christians in my 25 years as a pastor, who started down roads they should NOT have continued on. They didn't start out intending to end up where they did / or getting into the trouble they got into / or doing the damage to themselves and others which they eventually ended up doing.

Few (if any) ever start out traveling down a road with the intention of making a wreck out of their life. Yet they do. Why? Because they ignore the warning signs or think they're stronger than they really are. They over-estimate their own abilities and underestimate the craftiness of sin and Satan.

(I'm thinking of two people right now – missionaries I knew – (a married man and a single woman) who would have saved themselves / their families / and their church / much grief -- if they had simply paid attention to the warning signs and gotten off the road they innocently started down when they started to see the potential dangers involved.

As Christians, we could avoid a lot of wounds, scars and spiritual casualties, if we'd only heed the warning signs! God used that one close call (on the first day I rode in) to persuade me that it would be better, and safer, and wiser, to change the road I had initially chosen to travel on.

WHAT ABOUT YOU? Any concerns about the road you're on? Has God graciously given you any warning signs that it might be wiser / and safer / if you followed a different path than the one you're on right now?

LISTEN: God will NOT make the decision for you! But He will try to persuade you / He will speak in your conscience -- often through the advice of other wise and discerning people.

He will prompt you and seek to move you to change the path you're on -- because He loves you and wants the best for you.

And when He does, listen to Him. Listen to that, "still small voice." Pay attention to that "danger ahead sign" when it flashes in your conscience.

Because it's never wise to put yourself in harm's way / or travel the road that leads directly to temptation. / It's never wise to set yourself up for potential failure / keep following a path strewn with warning flags, when its within your power to change the path your on!

Then **SECONDLY**, I'd like to share the lessons I learned from changing my route and riding back and forth on route 313 instead. Because they were entirely different! And interestingly, all the lessons God taught me as I rode in on 313 had to do with the Body of Christ and the unity He desires within His Body. Every time I rode to the church on that road, that was the thing I felt He was teaching me.

So, let me simply tell you about my trip in, and see if you come up with the same lessons I did! From my house to the church is about 10 miles each way. I pull out of my neighborhood onto 663 / cautiously cross over 309 / and then follow Broad Street through the center of Quakertown where the traffic generally goes pretty slow.

Then I go through the light at the sharp bend by Strayer / and kick it into high gear as I pass the sewer treatment plant on my left / the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall further down on my right / and on past Paletown Road.

I coast past Jim and Karen McCaffery's road and go down that little hill until I get to the bottom / and then I downshift as I head up that long gradual $\frac{3}{4}$ mile incline by the Wagon Wheel Tavern -- the first time I start to work up a sweat.

Then I get to the top of the hill (just before 563 breaks off to the left), stop peddling, and coast down that huge hill for the next two to three minutes until I get to the bottom where the bridge goes over the reservoir -- some-times reaching speeds of 40 or 45 mph! (At least I assume I do since I'm going nearly as fast as many of the cars!)

But that's where all the fun stops! Because at the bottom of that hill I have to shift my bike into the lowest gear it has / and head up that huge hill! (Which I've determined to do without ever stopping!)

And you know what's amazing? As I go up that hill my feet are peddling at breakneck speed (super fast), yet I'm actually moving up the hill at a snail's pace, at least in terms of my forward speed or momentum!

On the straightaway's and as I go down some of the hills, I peddle at a relatively slow pace and I go very fast! But going up that hill I peddle with all my might and as fast as I can (without stopping for an instant lest I fall over), and I just creep along at a snail's pace until I reach the top.

Then I kick it back into high gear / go past the Old Country Place / and race down Ridge Road to the church trying to beat my previous time.

So, did you see how all that speaks so loudly about the Body of Christ and Church Unity? Did you? If not, let me explain. What struck me as I was riding in was this: At any given point in time in the life of the Body of Christ, you have people in every one of those modes of travel.

But this is the key: Unlike a race, where people hit the uphill grades and straightaway's or downhill chances to coast at different times -- in the church people are going through all those different stages at the same time.

When we ride in a race, we KNOW people will go fast when they're on the straightaway's / they'll sweat and grind and peddle like crazy while making little forward progress when they hit the big uphill inclines / and they'll coast downhill at high speed, without even needing to peddle, when they hit those wonderful downhill runs!

But in the church people are going through all those different stages at the same exact instant in time! So one person is coasting downhill effortlessly / at the exact same time that the person next to them is dripping in sweat and peddling with all their might (yet making little progress at all) -- and they don't understand it.

The person who is going through one of those coasting times might even say: "What's wrong with him?" or "What's up with her?" They are on a spiritual high so they don't understand why the other person is struggling so hard, when they're cruising along without even having to peddle!

They may even criticize the slower person, or get mad at them, or judge them - - because they're in one of those coasting modes at the exact same time that the other person is hanging on for dear life!

There would be much greater understanding between people if we ALL hit the same downhill slopes / or straightaway's / or uphill grades at the same time! But we don't! Which means we must work at trying to be more understanding.

As my grandfather used to say all the time when I was growing up: ***"Don't judge another until you have walked a mile in his shoes."*** And it's true.

There are **SOME PEOPLE** who in their life are riding on one of those straight-away's, and have kicked it into high gear, where the speed they're peddling at is relatively slow, but the speed they're going at is fast. They can do it because the road is straight and flat and devoid of potholes and there are no big hills to climb. So they can rather effortlessly cruise along at a pretty good clip.

They're at a point in life where things are going really smooth. Finances are good / they have more than enough to pay the bills / and can even take a second honeymoon / or toss some of the excess into an IRA.

The marriage is going well / the kids are behaving and getting good grades in school / their job status is secure / and they have sufficient time to study the Word and pray -- because everything is going so smoothly.

OTHER PEOPLE, though, are doing even better! Things aren't just going smoothly, they're going great! They were peddling along, but now they've gotten to that big downhill slope and have stopped peddling all together! They're effortlessly cruising downhill and even passing others as they do!

Things aren't simply going well for them, they're going wonderful! They are on a spiritual high and in one of those seasons of life where their health is great.
 / They just got a promotion and huge raise at work / the kids got full scholarships to college / the house is essentially empty / and now they have time for all the things they could never do before.

In fact, its freed them up to get more involved in ministry / visit with people / travel when they want / and do so without financial worry / or the many stresses and responsibilities of raising kids / or struggling to pay the bills and mortgage.

But then there are **YET OTHER PEOPLE**. They're going up one of those huge hills that seemingly rise up out of the landscape of life without warning. They're just as earnest and devout and hard working as the others, and have just as much faith, but the company the husband worked for for 30 years (as the sole bread winner) just went under, and not only does he lose his job, he loses his pension.

The lack of income makes it necessary for his wife to go out and find work lest they lose the house. / She works full time and he picks up two part time jobs while he's looking for another full time job.

The stress puts a lot of tension of their relationship / and their lack of family time evidences itself as the kids grades and behavior goes downhill. In fact, after two years with things getting no better, they have spats all the time / and begin to isolate themselves from the flock because of comments they hear / and even begin to wonder if God even cares about them at all.

In terms of spiritual effort, they're actually working HARDER than all the others! They're struggling just to stay afloat! They're going up that huge hill by the lake -- peddling like crazy but making virtually no forward progress at all -- and now they're just plain exhausted and burned out.

Which brings us to our LAST point: The lessons we can learn about the Body of Christ from biking. And I have THREE.

1st) We always need to work together as a team, or a Body. And on a team or in a Body, the different players or parts of that body need to be keenly aware of the places the other players or people are at. We need to be so attentive that we care enough to ask why they're sweating so much and peddling so hard!

In fact, those who are in the coasting downhill phase should probably offer to take a little of the load from the bike of the person who is engaged in that huge uphill climb phase of life.

Paul even says that in Galatians 6:2: "***Bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ.***" (That is, the "law" or "the new command" He gave us to love one another as He has loved us).

So, why are those who are coasting downhill given that grace? So they can focus more on others around them, since they don't have to focus so hard on peddling! That is, because we are a body, and are to function as a body, our times of excess and leisure are given to us so that we can help those who are struggling, peddling like crazy and bordering on burnout.

For instance, when you see parents with toddlers, who have those dark circles under their eyes (from exhaustion and lack of sleep), maybe it's time to ask them if they'd like you to take the kids for a night, so they can go on a date / and relax / and not have to be watching where junior is every second!

With us it was two juniors at the same time / with different sleeping schedules / who would often head off in different directions at the same time)! And I thank God for people who offered to take them (sometimes overnight) just so we could get some sleep and down time.

2nd) We read in Ephesians 4: ***"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."***

You see, our natural tendency is to say: "Hey, I'm going fast, so everyone else should be keeping up with me. How can they be peddling so hard and yet going so slow?" It's life viewed from our vantage point alone.

But humility, gentleness and patience seeks to view things from their vantage point. To use my grandfather's saying: "I must seek to walk a mile in the shoes of the one I don't understand."

That's what humility does. It moves beyond pride and our ego based perspective to view life as if we were walking in their shoes / and going through what they're going through / and had experienced everything they've experienced.

And when we do, the result is gentleness and patience in dealing with others.

And **3rd)** also speaking of the Body and unity, Paul says in I Thess. 5:14-15: ***"We urge you brothers, warn those who are idle (it's true, some are just being lazy), encourage the timid, help the weak, and be patient with everyone. Pay back no one wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and everyone else."***

You see, for the Body to function as it should, every part needs to do their part.
That's why we are to warn the idle. Everyone has a job to do.

Yet, when it comes to others who want to get involved but are timid, we are to encourage them. That is, "help give them courage" or, literally, "give them heart." We are to come beside them and help them see that they can. We are to help them move beyond their fears and become more confident.

We are help the weak (and it means morally weak -- those who struggle with sin and temptation) and be patient / never vengeful / and kind to everyone.

Simply riding my bike to church taught me all that!