

THESE CLOTHES ARE NEVER OUT OF STYLE

10th in a Series on Proverbs titled, “Mastering Life”

Passage: Proverbs 14:10

I want to begin this morning by using some dirty words. If you are sensitive to such things I encourage you to cover your ears for a moment, because I am going to mention three of the foulest words in the English language. Those words are, “some... assembly... required.” No I know that for many of you these words are completely benign. They hold no threat for you. Some of you even welcome them and enjoy the challenge they bring. You are sick, and you need to get some help. I recall a conversation with a friend some time back in which this person shared a “some assembly required” horror story. I empathized. I could actually feel the frustration. That’s because I know one of three things will happen every time I do a required assembly. Either the parts included will be missing something, or the parts won’t be engineered properly so that what the instructions show will prove to be physically impossible, or, most common of all, my ineptitude will result in some kind of disaster. Last year we bought some patio furniture that required assembly. One of the pieces was a chair that glides. Laurie and I put it together. The instructions had us turn it upside down to install the glider mechanism. When we finished and stood up it canted forward at an impossible angle and wouldn’t glide. I thought it had to be the worst chair I’d ever seen. What was wrong? Eventually we figured it out. We had installed the mechanism upside down. So, as is common for me, we had to take it apart and do it all over again. So when someone shares their frustration over a project that involves assembly, I feel for them. That’s what hardship and pain can do for us. It can actually create something good in us. It is something that is a significant part of mastering life. We will learn about that from Proverbs beginning with Proverbs 14:10.

THE WORLD IS FULL OF HURTING PEOPLE

Proverbs 14:10 says, “Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy.” The message there is that there are things that are going on in the hearts of all of us that no one else is fully aware of and can completely understand. There is joy in the hearts of all of us, but there is also bitterness. The Proverb claims that each heart knows its own bitterness, meaning in the heart of each person, in all of us, there is that bitterness. In this case the bitterness is not resentment at other people, but the opposite of joy. It is the bitterness of disappointment, loss and grief.

The Hebrew word translated “bitterness” here is *marah*. In the book of Ruth we see an Israeli woman named Naomi leave Israel with her husband because of a famine. They move to Moab, a neighboring country, but eventually Naomi’s husband and both of her sons die. By this time conditions have gotten better in Israel so accompanied by Ruth, one of her daughters in law, Naomi returns to her homeland. In Ruth 1:20-21 when she arrives and everyone is saying, “Can this be Naomi?” she answers, “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara, because the

Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.” The name “Naomi” literally meant “pleasant” or “my pleasantness.” She said that name no longer applied. Her life was the farthest thing from pleasant. She had lost her husband and her two sons and she was destitute. That’s a pretty large helping of pain. Saying, “Call me Mara” meaning bitter, would have been a bit like today if her name was Joy, and she said, “Don’t call me Joy, call me Dolores,” because Dolores is the Spanish name for sorrows. Naomi wasn’t angry and resentful, she was heartbroken.

In Exodus 15:23 after they had escaped from Egypt and God had parted the waters of the Red Sea, as Israel wandered in the arid wasteland of the Sinai desert they came across some water. Verse 23 says, “When they came to Marah they could not drink its water because it was bitter. That is why the place is called Marah.” Isn’t it a bit curious that they couldn’t drink the water because it was bitter? I figure if I was in a desert and was out of water, dying of thirst, I could probably choke down some water no matter how bad it tastes. That water must have been awfully bad to prefer having no water to drinking it. As it turns out, one derivative of the word *marah* means “poison.” The people couldn’t drink it not because it tasted so bad but because it would make them sick and maybe even kill them. It was Marah the way the water in Tijuana is marah.

That gives us a little hint to the effect of the kind of bitterness that resides in a broken heart. It is poison. It can make our hearts sick and even kill them. Proverbs 15:13 says, “A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit.” It certainly had that effect on poor Naomi. As this verse from Proverbs states, we don’t really know the sadness, the bitterness, the pain and disappointment that is buried in the hearts of other people. Though it may not look like it, there is some of that in everyone you know. Every human heart has collected pain through the years.

Proverbs 18:14 says, “The human spirit can endure in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?” That is so true. We have seen people in our church deal with sickness and show tremendous endurance and strength. I think of how Bill Farrington soldiers on through Parkinson’s and I am humbled and amazed by the spirit I see in Dalja every time I talk to her despite her battle with a brain tumor. Last year I witnessed great courage in both Sue and Chuck Badger as they waged their final battles. But when someone’s heart is crushed, when their spirit is broken and they have no hope, that becomes unbearable.

When I was in seminary, I had a professor who reminded us that we should preach to people with broken hearts. He said we needed to do that not because there were some people with broken hearts in our future congregations, but because pretty much everyone we would preach to had some brokenness in them. People typically don’t go around advertising their bitterness and sadness, but it is there. Many years of ministry have taught me that there is a huge amount of pain in the world around us, and we often are not aware of that pain in

people's hearts. People live with disappointment because life has not gone anywhere close to what they envisioned, because dreams are shattered, because they have been hurt or rejected, because people they want to be close to have not loved them the way they desire, because they have failed or disappointed themselves, because life has handed them a bunch of lemons so rotten you can't even make lemonade out of it.

People do not readily spill out the sadness in their souls to other people. Sometimes that's because they fear it will make them appear weak or make them vulnerable. Sometimes it's because they don't want to complain. Sometimes it's because they are ashamed and want to keep up the front that they have it all together and everything is awesome. But sometimes it's because they've shared their hurt in the past and the response they've gotten from others has only made it worse.

Laurie and I both got a taste of that a few years back when I was let go from our prior ministry. It was a difficult time because we were in a situation where we couldn't talk freely with many people about it. But of course we did get input from some people who shared their "spiritual" wisdom. One woman pulled Laurie aside and told her she had to let go of the situation and trust God with it. There was some truth in that, but what was the implication of her sharing that? It was that Laurie wasn't letting go and wasn't trusting God. Did the woman think that Laurie and I didn't know we needed to trust God? In addition to dealing with a hard thing Laurie got to experience the annoyance of essentially being told she needed to do better at following God. It was especially irritating because that woman really didn't have any idea what was going on in Laurie's heart.

Of course at that time I was dealing with the problem of how I was going to provide for myself and Laurie. I had more than 30 years of ministry experience, which qualified me for exactly zero other career paths. This was made even more fun by the fact that I had reached an age that made me nearly untouchable for anyone looking to hire people. No one wants old guys. In that situation, of course, there was a "friend" who wanted to fix my dilemma and shared his wisdom. He suggested that I should get a job teaching at a college. Gee, thanks, what a great idea. All I need to do is spend 5 years trying to get a Ph. D. using money I don't have, then I will have the privilege of joining all the other Ph. D.'s out there who can't find a full time job anywhere. I am certain that you have been in that situation where you are being torn up inside over something and after you have shared that with someone they shared their wisdom and advice that is totally unhelpful and more than a little annoying. It's really irritating to have someone share some "solution" that you know very well if they were in your shoes they would never pursue because it's totally impractical. After that's happened to you a time or two you become careful about sharing your problems with others.

All around you are people who have hidden agony over the loss of someone they love dearly, or over their marriage that is a train wreck, or their children who are not walking with God

and could care less, or because relationships that are important to them are broken or so unhealthy they are about to break, or because they have some failing or some sin that keeps dogging them and they can't defeat it, or because they just don't feel like they measure up. There are more griefs and disappointments than I can list, and you would not have to go far to find many of them among the people that you know. That is the unfortunate reality of life in a fallen world.

GOD WANTS US TO HAVE COMPASSION

So we have these Proverbs that tell us that we don't really know all the heartbreaks and bitterness of others, and that a crushed spirit is deadly. Why do you suppose God thought he should inform us of this truth? What do you think he wants us to do about it? Is it so that we can just file that piece of information away somewhere? Is it so we can say, well, at least I'm not as bad off as that guy? Is it so we can tell them to get over it, pull themselves up and get moving? Or is it so we can agree because we know the pain in our own hearts and then resent people for not caring more about our hurt?

I submit to you that God gave us these verses because he wants us to learn from it and have some pity on the people around us. He wants us to have compassion for them. If that is not the case then there was no need for these verses. That proposition is proven true by the rest of Scripture.

Consider the example of Jesus. Matthew 9:36 says of Jesus, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." He didn't say, "What a bunch of dumb sheep." He had compassion on them. In Mark 1:40-41 according to the New American Standard translation, "a leper came to Jesus, beseeching him and falling on his knees before him, saying, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Moved with compassion Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I am willing; be cleansed.'" Jesus didn't say, "Eww, gross. Get away from me. You're disgusting." He had compassion on him, so much compassion that he actually touched the guy, something no one else would have done.

In Luke 7 Jesus was coming to the village of Nain, which was roughly eight miles south of Nazareth. As he was getting close he encountered a funeral procession. The deceased was the only son of a widow. Verses 13-15 (NASB) tell us what happened. "When the Lord saw her (the widow) he felt compassion for her, and said to her, 'Do not weep.' And he came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. He said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.' The dead man sat up and began to speak." Once again, Jesus was full of compassion. As you read through the gospels you will see that time and time again.

In Luke 5 Jesus was out and about and saw a man named Levi doing his job, which was collecting taxes. This made Levi a despised man, for good reasons. He was working for the Romans, whom the Jews considered oppressors. He was collecting taxes for them so they could use the money to fund their occupation and oppression of the Jewish people. Plus, he was a heartless, dishonest man. The Romans required that he collect a given amount of tax money, and any amount he got above that was his to keep. This gave him incentive to extort money from people. He used the threat of Roman force to squeeze them mercilessly. So there were many people who were desperately poor who had to knuckle under to his threats and give to him significant portions of the little they had, all so that he could have a rich lifestyle. How do you think religious people viewed Levi and treated him? They hated him, and they made it very clear they wanted as little to do with him as possible. They considered him to be lower than whale doodoo, which is oceans deep. This was not a prime candidate for a leadership role in a religious movement. Yet when Jesus saw him he said, “Follow me.” Uncle Jesus wants *you*! Furthermore, he then went to a party with all of Levi’s low life colleagues and associates. This was outrageous, because everyone knew what went on at those parties. Of course the religious people were scandalized, disgusted and appalled. They criticized him to his disciples, but Jesus responded in verse 31-32, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

I did a little research on what Jesus said there. I took a survey of all the emergency medicine doctors in my family and asked them, “On average, how many of the patients you see in the emergency department are there because they are perfectly healthy and have no complaints?” The answer was zero. The people who show up are all sick or injured. In my survey I also asked, “How often do you tell your patients, ‘You’re sick. You’re disgusting. Go away and get better. When you’re all better you can come back and I’ll see you then.’” The answer to that question obviously is never. They are there at the hospital because they are sick and they need help, they need care. As evidenced by his interaction with Matthew and his pack of scummy friends, Jesus saw sick, often disgusting people, and had compassion for them. Instead of being repelled by them, he cared for them.

Consider the example of the Heavenly Father. Psalm 103:8 says, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.” Psalm 103:13 says, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.” Psalm 116:5 says the Lord is full of compassion. 2 Corinthians 1:3 says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” He feels our pain and seeks to ease it.

In Luke 15 Jesus told the story of the lost son, most commonly known as the Prodigal Son. You know the story. The kid, the youngest son, was brash and full of himself. He wanted his inheritance because he was tired of the boring life on the family farm. He was drawn by the bright lights. His dad gave in and gave him his money. He immediately left home and made a

bee line for Las Vegas. He went on a non-stop party bus, until he burned through every dime he had. Suddenly all his party friends disappeared now that the money was gone. He found himself destitute, starving and alone. He finally realized way too late what a fool he was. The only hope he could see was to humble himself and go crawling back home, hoping that his dad would give him a job as the lowest of servants, for even those peons were way better off than he was. So he stuck his tail between his legs and headed home, practicing the speech he'd give to his dad. "I'm so sorry, Dad. I was arrogant and inexcusably stupid. I have no excuse and you have no reason to help me. But is there any chance I could get a job on the farm? I'll do anything." He deserved nothing but disgust and disdain. But verse 20 tells us, "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." Who does the father in the story represent? He represents God the Father, who looks on his reprobate, fallen, undeserving children and is filled with compassion for them.

Ephesians 5:1 says, "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children." Other translations translate that "Be imitators of God." I love comedians who can imitate other people and sound just like them. I'd love to imitate famous people, but when I try I don't sound anything like them. However, I can imitate God. If we imitate God, we will also be full of compassion for flawed, failing, undeserving, hurting people.

Consider the commands God gives us. Just in case we haven't connected the dots yet, God made it explicit in his word. Zechariah 7:8-9 says, "And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah. This is what the Lord Almighty said, 'Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another.'" Luke 6:36 says, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another." Colossians 3:12 says, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, gentleness, humility and patience."

Clothe yourself with compassion. I was thinking recently about fashion. I don't do that a lot, but what sparked my reflection was a catalog in the mail. We get an absurd number of catalogs, many of them from companies that we've never bought anything from and never will. Obviously somebody has been selling our information to lots of mail order companies. Though we get a couple like Sgt. Grit and the Wright Brothers (aviation stuff), the general theme of the catalogs is women's clothes. One of the catalogs had some of the latest styles, but I've seen them before. It was a return to the early 90's look. It had blouses with shoulder pads. You know the look? I thought about how clothing people have to keep changing styles so that women will buy the latest thing, even if it is a retread from 25 or 30 years ago. I thought, "wouldn't it be nice if you could have clothes that would never go out of style?" Well you can. Clothe yourself with compassion, because it is always in vogue. It is always beautiful. It is always welcome and needed. It is clothing that is always in style.

In Luke 4:18-19 when Jesus began his ministry, he inaugurated it in the synagogue by reading a passage from Isaiah that said, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus’ whole life was about compassion for the poor and oppressed, for people like us. We all know that true compassion for hurting people is a divine trait. It touches everyone who sees it, and they know that God is in it. Jamie Boleyn is a young woman who was raised by her divorced, single mom. She remembers a time not long after the divorce when her mom lost her job. She had no income but still had kids to raise and bills to pay. To say she was stressed is a huge understatement. Very soon after she lost her job, when she got up in the morning one day, she found a box of food on their doorstep. The next day the same thing happened. It went on every morning for months until she got a job. Jamie says they never knew who put the food there. Doesn’t that touch your heart and make you want to be compassionate?

Marilyn Kinsella, an artist, was going to fly to a different city. She doesn’t fly much so she forgot about the TSA rules on liquids in carry-on bags. She was bringing her paint supplies, but had to give them all up. A week later she flew home. She was stunned when a TSA agent found her in the terminal and gave her all her paint supplies. He not only had kept them safe for a week, but had looked up her return date so he could meet her and give them back. I can hardly believe that happened, but that is a beautiful, even divine thing.

A few months ago Laurie and I were on vacation on Maui. One evening we had dinner at a restaurant, then headed back to the place where we were staying. We were walking along Front Street, the main street of the little town of Lahaina. As we were walking a sketchy looking man approached me and asked if we would like to buy some drugs. I just kept walking. I was kind of annoyed. Do Laurie and I look like drug users? Do we look like people looking for a fix? I found myself being irritated by the guy. I thought, he needs to clean up his act and get a life. What I didn’t have for him, was compassion. I was kind of judgmental and superior in the way I viewed him. It occurred to me several minutes later that I probably could have responded in a way better than just brushing him off as I did. I could have stopped and politely said no thanks, then said I had something to offer him that was much better than anything he had. Sadly I find that I have a lot of occasions when after the fact I end up thinking, “Shoot, what I should have done...or what I should have said...” Don’t judge me. I need your compassion!

APPLICATION

DON’T THINK LIKE THE WORLD

In James 2 we are warned against showing favoritism to a rich person over a poor person. Even so long ago in a very different culture, the rich were catered to and the poor were

ignored or put down. That happens every single day today. In verse 4 James said, “have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” What is the evil thought he’s talking about? Why do people always show preference to the rich and famous? Why are poor people so often treated like they’re invisible? In the end it is because we hope to get something from the rich person. The poor person, we think, can be of no benefit to us. But in some way, either through status or connections or maybe even some financial boon, we hope the rich person can be of advantage to us. In short, we are not loving either the rich or poor person, we are looking out for ourselves and using them.

In 2 Corinthians 5:16 Paul said, “From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.” Paul, an up-and-coming respected Pharisee, once regarded Christ from a worldly point of view. He thought Jesus was a nobody. He was an uneducated blue-collar nothing from nowheresville. Paul wrote him off as nothing more than a troublesome lower class heretical rabble rouser. He now knew much to his grief, that he couldn’t have been more wrong.

When we look down on people we get something out of that. “That person is disgusting. I’m not like that person.” We elevate our own status, at least in our estimation. When we see only the failing and the sin of people, we are judging them from a worldly point of view. We are seeing them in a way far different than God sees them.

God looks on people as a father has compassion on his children. I’ve been promoted from father to grandfather. If anything, I think I have more compassion as Yapaw than I did as Daddy, and I had a lot as Daddy. If you ask me if my grandchildren are perfect I will tell you right off, they absolutely are. Logic tells me they are not. I can see the emotional meltdowns over the fact that for whatever reason they don’t want to wear their Minnie Mouse jammies tonight or for some other equally momentous event. But that doesn’t change how I see them even a little. I see only how precious they are and how much I love them. And when they hurt it causes an intense ache in me that is unbearable. And that is how God views us. Of course he sees our failings and he doesn’t want them for he knows they are bad for us and for others. But he still dotes on us and feels deeply for us. He tells us he wants us to see people not as the world sees them, but as he sees them. And if we do that will we have great compassion for them, no matter how they might appear to the world.

LET PAIN WORK

There was a time many years ago before I was married that I decided to read through all the Gospels. When I did that I was struck by the same thing I noted earlier, how often we read that Jesus had compassion on people. As I thought about it I realized that was kind of a summation of his whole life. Why was he on the planet? It was because he had compassion for all of us, for undeserving, fallen people. In reflecting on that it seemed to me that I ought

to be a lot more compassionate. I found it pretty easy to think people just needed to buck up and try harder. So I began to pray that God would make me more compassionate.

God answered my prayer. One way he did that was by giving us children. Somehow having kids created a lot more gentleness in my soul and made me much more tender and aware of the pain of other people. But then God let something happen that made me almost hypersensitive to pain. Laurie and I went through the nightmare of having a child be critically ill and ultimately die. That was a soul crushing experience. We went through pain deeper than I had ever imagined even existed. It was an awful, devastating, horrific ordeal. But God used it in my life. It was a life-changing experience in a myriad of ways, but one of them was that it created compassion in my heart, way more than had ever been there.

Some time after our son, Joel, had died, there was a woman in our church who at one time had been in the hospital and at another time whose husband had died. I visited with her on both occasions. After the death of her husband she said to a friend who relayed it to me, “When Rick visited me in the hospital I appreciated it, and I knew he was trying to help, but honestly it felt like he was doing his duty. But now something has changed. He is different. He understands. I can feel his compassion and caring.” What had changed was my heart had been broken, and I identified with her pain.

God is amazing at using things that happen to us to prepare us for something later. Our son, Toby, starts taking the last of the huge tests he has to pass to be a fully certified doctor. This one is a monster, lasting 17 hours! So he has been studying like crazy to prepare for it. Recently he texted us one of the questions on the practice test. It was a case study of a 33-year-old man who wakes up in the morning and discovers that there was a bat in his room. He has no clear indication that he had been bitten. What is the proper course of treatment for this man? Toby immediately knew that the answer is to give him a full course of rabies shots including a gamma globulin shot because you can be bitten by a bat and not know it. He knew that because that had happened to his mom and dad and he had to come up with the answer for how we should be treated.

The root of the word “compassion” means to suffer with. It means to feel the same pain another person is feeling. The way we do that is we find out how awful that pain can be through personal experience. The good news about this is that our suffering is not pointless. God can and will use it to deepen our compassion if we let him. All of us have our own hurts and disappointments. We can ask God to use them to make us more caring for others, to work something beautiful in our hearts because of it.

HAVE THE HEART OF JESUS

As is always the case, the most important thing we can do is to let Jesus rule and transform our hearts. The more we submit to him, the more we ask him to control us and make us like

him, the more compassion we are going to have, for he is full of compassion. The more we love Jesus, the more we walk with him, the more he transforms our hearts the more we are going to become like him. And if we are like him we will have the compassion he has. So we must walk with him and ask him to change us, to make us more like him.

There was something that happened about 15 years ago that I have never forgotten. Maybe you heard about it and remember it. It involved a 17-year-old young man named Jake Porter who was in his last year at Northwest High School in McDermott, Ohio. Jake unfortunately is the victim of a genetic defect called Fragile X Syndrome. The result was that he has some significant intellectual deficits. He can barely write his own name. Jake is impoverished when it comes to everything our world values. He can be of almost no benefit to others, and so the world will never value him. He will never be influential, respected, lauded or even noticed. He will be seriously marginalized. But he was always cheerful, and he loved football. Even though there was no chance he would ever actually play in a game, he went out for the football team and faithfully attended every practice. The football coach, Dave Frantz, wanted to reward Jake for his dedication, faithfulness, cheerfulness and support of his teammates. So he came up with an idea. It was the last game of the season, the final football game for Jake ever. The team's opponent that last week was Waverly High, whose coach, Derek Dewitt, was a good friend of Coach Frantz. So Coach Frantz called coach Dewitt, explained the situation and asked if Jake could come on the field for one play at the end of the game, assuming the outcome of the game was not in doubt. They would line him up as a running back, give him the ball and have him kneel down. Coach Dewitt readily agreed. So that Friday night the game wound down to the final five seconds. Northwest had the ball. The game was a blowout with Waverly far ahead, so the coach called time out. He went onto the field to explain what they were going to do to the players and the referees as Jake trotted onto the field. But Coach Dewitt also came onto the field and it was apparent there was a disagreement of some kind. Finally it got resolved. The ball was snapped, the quarterback handed it to Jake and he started to kneel as he had practiced that week. But his teammates stopped him and told him to run. The disagreement between the coaches had been over the plan. Coach Dewitt had insisted that he didn't just want Jake to get in the game. He wanted him to score. So the plan was changed to have Jake carry the ball. Confused by the change Jake started to run in the wrong direction. The referee stopped him and turned him in the right direction. Coach Dewitt had told his players, "They're going to give the ball to number 45. Don't touch him. Open a hole and let him score." So as Jake got close to the line of scrimmage a huge hole miraculously opened and he rumbled through headed for the end zone. As Jake ran in for the touchdown players on both teams celebrated and cheered for him. Jake not only got in the game, he scored a touchdown and got a memory that will stay with him all his life. He also got a clear message that some people really cared for him.