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Luke 11:11-13 ESV.

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

A Minor Car Accident and a Serpent.

I don't like to misuse Bible quotes, the way a lot of pastors do, by interpreting a passage so out of context that it is used to make a point that the passage was never meant by its author to address. I always try to give the greater context of a passage, so that we understand it in the fashion in which it was meant to be interpreted. However, I am going to somewhat break my rule with one of the quotes we're going to look at today – but don't worry, I'll let you know when I'm doing this, and we'll see if we can get some greater insight by looking at the larger context. However, let me start with something that happened years ago.

At one point, I was living in an apartment building in Boulder; I had moved to Boulder from L.A. to take a job in the engineering school at CU Boulder. The apartment building was a bit rundown. It was three stories, with another basement floor filled with apartments. The building was made of brick. It was an older building with heating that consisted of a hot fluid running through pipes under the floor; those pipes loved to leak rust all over my apartment. It was cheap and gave me easy access to Bob's Big Boy across the alley, where I frequently ate, and there was a tire shop, where I had my car

worked on. There was a Monkey Wards across the street, where I once took my vacuum cleaner to be repaired after I used it to suck up a broken potted plant. One day, in the winter, someone knocked on my door. It was a boy, who turned out to be sixteen, a big kid, with a sheepish expression and a bit of an almost midwestern accent. He said that somebody told him that I owned the '82 Honda Civic that was parked on the street. I said yes. He said that he was really very, very sorry, but he had just damaged it. It was snowing heavily he said, and he was driving down the street in his Jeep, going very slow, honestly, he said, when he slid and hit my car. He repeated that he was so, very, very sorry. I put on a coat, and having moved from LA, it was the first coat I had ever owned. There was a small dent on one of my fenders. I told him that it was no big deal, that I appreciated him coming to my door, that he was clearly an honest kid. He looked somewhat relieved. He said that his father would pay for it, and could I please not call the police or the insurance company. I said fine, if his father would cover the body work. We went back inside my apartment, and he called his father. But he barely got out the words that he had slid on the ice and damaged the fender of a man's car, when I could hear his father yelling at him over the phone. The boy's expression went from nervous to terrified. I will get back to this.

Consider the following from Colossians, 3:20-21, of the ESV:

²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Colossians was written to a city called Colossae, in what is now Turkey; it was a prosperous city, with a textile and wool-dyeing industry. The church there was founded by a man who was probably converted by Paul. Paul is the stated author of the letter; but many scholars question this, as it contains a vocabulary not found in his other letters, the letter does not focus on Paul's favorite topics relating to righteousness and justification by faith alone, and the letter emphasizes the works of the Apostles far more than his other letters. Mind you, Paul in his other letters tended to perhaps not show the highest respect for the Apostles. All we know is that either Paul wrote it, or it was written by a faithful follower of his who then honored Paul by attributing the letter to him. This would also have given the letter more weight – and it was not considered inappropriate back then to use the name of a famous Christian when writing something theological or something about church doctrine. We'll just assume Paul wrote it. Paul, however, had never been to Colossae at the time the letter was written. His purpose in writing the letter was to counteract a growing tendency of Christians there to deny the deity of Jesus, and to infuse Christianity with various pagan mystical practices. In the letter, he urged the believers in Colossae to return to a pure form of the faith by focusing solely on the teachings of Christ and the belief that Jesus is indeed God. Paul was also trying to get the people there to welcome the arrival of the carrier of the letter, Tychicus, whom Paul considered a "dear brother" and a faithful follower of Jesus. Further, Paul was

trying to support the leader of the church there, as that person was under attack by some of the church's wayward members. Finally, Paul worked hard in the letter to get the church to accept his authority, as well as the authority of some of his followers.

In the part of the letter where our quote comes from, the context is this: Paul is trying to supply some guidelines on how Christian households should be run. These verses say two things. First, kids should obey their dads, and second, fathers shouldn't cause their kids to get angry or frustrated with them. Children depend on their fathers for encouragement, and a father who is a tyrant will discourage their kids.

Let me tell you a little more about the teenager - who had just gotten his driver's license, as it turns out - and who slightly damaged my Honda Civic. His father had sent him from the family farm in Kansas to Boulder, to pick up his kid brother who had been attending some event in Boulder. He had sent off this teenager, whom we will call Jake, in a heavy snowstorm. Then when the kid slid on the ice and did hit my parked car, his father lit into him about being careless. His dad yelled that he couldn't trust Jake to do the simplest errand. Talk about making your son discouraged, as our quote from Colossians notes. The poor oversized teenager was near tears as his father screamed. This is how you break a child, not turn him into a child of God.

Now, when I heard the father yelling on the phone, I asked Jake if I could please talk to his father. As it turned out, I had no kids at the time, and this was the first time I ever acted as a sort of pastor or chaplain. But I was a professor, and I was used to

standing up for students who worked hard and seemed sincere. I started out calm and logical, explaining that it was really very slick outside, that I could easily have done the same thing, and that his son was very polite, and respectful. I said that he, the Dad, should be proud of the way his boy had dealt with the situation. This got me nowhere.

The father was pissed. I wish that at the time, I had thought of this passage from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 11, verses 11 to 13, and again, this is from the ESV:

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

This father, I decided, had a son who had turned to him for guidance – and the father had given him a serpent in return. This passage is something Jesus said on his way to Jerusalem, where he would be tried and executed. Now this is where I want to be careful about interpreting the Bible. I'm not one of those pastors who twists a verse or uses it entirely out of context to make some point. This passage isn't really meant to be a lesson on how to be a good parent. The larger context around this passage has to do with the power of praying to God. The point is that if we pray to God for something good, he, our Heavenly father, will not hand us something useless or dangerous. We might not get what we want, but if we ask God for a fish, we certainly will not get a snake. If we ask God for an egg, we won't get a scorpion. Jake depended on his father to not send him off on a dangerous or foolish mission, such as driving in the winter when he had zero experience

driving, but what he got from his father, well - it was actually both a snake and a scorpion.

As constructively as I could, I laid into Jake's father. Okay, I admit it, I was a somewhat young guy at the time, and I was not as respectful as I should have been. I told him that he is the one who sent his new driver son off in a blizzard, all the way from Kansas to Boulder, when it might have been better to either make the drive himself, or at least go with his son, or better yet, delay the trip and find lodging for his younger son until the weather got better. I told him that the cops were not involved, that my car would only cost a few hundred dollars to fix (this was a while back), and that Jake was being an extremely responsible kid by asking around until he found out who owned the car he had damaged, and then coming to my door. But the man interrupted me, angrily saying that he had told Jake to be careful. I told him that you can be as careful as possible and still slide on the ice, and that the street in front of my apartment was narrow, and that it clearly had been a very low speed accident, only a couple of miles per hour. He then proceeded to tell me that he didn't know if he would be able to leave his farm to his son, that Jake might not be up to the task. There is another quote that I wish, at the time, I had thought to say this man, and it comes from Proverbs, Chapter 13, verse 22, and again, from the ESV translation:

²² *A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous.*

Again, I don't like to take Bible passages and use them out of context, so let me

make it clear that this passage isn't entirely about inheriting wealth or the family farm, but it is reasonably relevant to this story. I need to step back, however. This proverb can be hard to interpret. Superficially, it seems to say that a good man invests and saves his money so well that he manages to leave something for his grandkids. But then it says that a sinner's wealth is laid up for – that it is given to - the righteous. Here's what it really means. The first part is not actually about money. What it means is that the best thing you can leave your family is virtue and the example of living a godly life; and, if this is what you leave behind you, it won't run out in one generation like money will, and thus, it will be passed on and on and on. But, on the other hand, when it comes to a person who does not live the way God wants us to live, well, this part of the passage is indeed about money, and it says that God will ultimately take their earthly wealth from them - and it will end up in the hands of better people. What really happened with Jake's dad, since I didn't think of tossing this quote at him and giving him a nice sermon, was that he proceeded to curse, as they say, a blue streak, as he expressed the deep shame he had for his son. I don't know what sort of farm Jake's father was leaving his son, but I do know that he wasn't leaving him much of a Christian legacy. He wasn't leaving the kind of inheritance that can be passed down for many generations without ever being diminished.

Now, the truth is that I didn't get anywhere with Jake's father. I failed totally with him – or so it seemed at the time. Jake's dad told me to send him a bill for my car.

Jake left my apartment looking very discouraged, to say the least. I did my best to buck him up and tell him that if I had done the exact same thing as a teenager, my father would have been very proud of the way I handled it. I asked him if his family was Christian, and he yes, very much so, and I said, well someday, if you or I have kids, we'll know how to better handle something like this, right? I assumed that he found his little brother and drove him back to Kansas. I got my car fixed and didn't worry about whether I would get paid. But I did send the bill to Jake's father, and very quickly, I got a check from him. There was no note with the check, but the check did clear. Weeks went by and I pretty much forgot about the whole thing. Then late one night, my phone rang. It was Jake's father. He said that earlier in the day, he had slid off the road, almost rolled his pickup truck, and hit a tree. He said that he had been trapped in it because his ankle was broken, and he couldn't work the clutch. Guess what? His son, Jake, got worried when his father didn't come home, and so Jake went looking for him. He found his dad, put him in his Jeep, picked up his kid brother back at the farm, and then took Dad to the ER. Dad was back at home, with a cast on his ankle, having been told that he did not need surgery. He did, however, get a ticket for driving too fast for the conditions. Huh!

No, I did not burst out laughing at him. I was silent for a moment, waiting to see if he had anything more to say. He did. He told me he was sorry for being rude to me, that he should have realized that I was being very kind to his son by getting

on the phone with his angry father. He said that his father had been a cruel man, that he whipped his children, that he frequently yelled and cursed. He said that he forgot what it was like growing up with his father and how much he had grown to resent him. He said that he hugged his son Jake and apologized for not being understanding about the silly little car accident in that hippie town, Boulder, that he should never have sent Jake out in a blizzard six months after getting his driver's license. He asked me to forgive him, that he had already asked his son for the same thing. I told him that if Jake forgave, then I am sure God did, and that meant that I forgave him, too. He said yes that his son had forgiven him.

There is, of course, a bigger context here. I don't like taking Bible quotes out of context, but I think it's perfectly fine to generalize and draw out a larger lesson from a Bible passage. One of the fundamentals of being a Christian, of emulating the beliefs of Jesus, is that how we treat others is an extremely powerful indicator of the sincerity and depth of our faith. As Paul says:

²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

This is true for all people with whom we come into contact, not just our children. We try to build people up in a constructive way, not rip into them for disappointing us. We also remember what Jesus says about the importance of turning to God with trust:

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

God is forgiving, generous, and gracious with us, and so we are obliged to treat other people in the same way – all other people in our lives. And of course, we remember that proverb that says:

²² A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous.

This passage tells us that we have an opportunity in our lives to leave an inheritance behind us, one where we show others by our actions and words that we can change the people around us. We can bless them by making them see how to act as someone made in the image of God. This is the core of our faith: that it is mirrored by how we live.