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Colossians 3:20-22 ESV.

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

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!"

Proverbs 13:22 ESV.

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

Giving a serpent.

I moved to Boulder from L.A. when I was twenty-seven, and maybe a year later, I was living in an apartment – in the same building where I met Wendy, by the way.

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. The carpet should have been thrown out when Abraham Lincoln was President. The window

in my bedroom would open if you were strong enough and stay open if you shoved a very strong piece of wood under it. The hallways were dark. But it was cheap and gave me easy access to Bob's Big Boy across the alley, where I frequently ate, and the 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. The story I'm about to tell you happened before I met Wendy. 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. 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 recently moved from LA, it was the first coat I had ever owned. I put on boots and went out with him. 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 a very 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 screaming at him over the phone. The boy's expression went from nervous to terrified. I will get back to this.

We have three brief Bible quotes today. The first is from Colossians and says: 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 probably was 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, and the letter emphasizes the works of the Apostles far more than his other letters. So, either Paul wrote it, or it was written by a faithful follower of his, who honored Paul by attributing the letter to him. 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 worship, not just God, but also cosmic powers. He was also trying to get the people there to welcome the

arrival of the carrier of the letter, Tychicus. 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 and his teachings, as well as those of some of his followers. In the part of the letter where our quote comes from, he's trying to set down 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. The problem with this second thing is that this causes children to become discouraged.

Let me tell you a little more about the teenager - who had just gotten his driver's license - and who damaged my Honda Civic. His father had sent him from 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 a little damage, 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 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 was single at the time, with no kids, and this was the first time I ever acted as a pastor or chaplain. Looking back, it was the first time that I can remember feeling, well, very fatherly toward someone. I started out calm and logical, explaining that it was really very slick outside, that I could easily have done the same thing, that his son was very polite, respectful, and honest, and that he, 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 our second quote, the one from Luke: *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?* This was a father, I decided, whose son had turned to him for guidance – and had received a snake in return. This passage is something Jesus said on his way to Jerusalem, where he would be tried and executed. Interestingly, this passage wasn'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, but what he got, well, it was both a snake and a scorpion.

What I did was, as constructively as I could, lay into Jake's father. Okay, I admit it, I was a young guy, 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 near-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 couple of hundred dollars to fix (this was 1983), 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, that the street in front of my apartment was narrow, and that it clearly had been a very low speed accident. I told him I bet he hit my car at no more than a mile or two an 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. Just like with our second quote, I didn't think of it then, but I realize now that what I should have done was toss our third quote at him: *A good man leaves an*

inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous. 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. This proverb can actually 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. But here's what it really means. The first part is not actually about money. What it really 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 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. 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 and rolled his pickup truck. He said that he had been trapped in it because his ankle was broken. Guess what? His son, Jake, 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.

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 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. Please pray with me.

God, let us always be kind to other people. Let us always remember that we don't know what they have been through, that if we can keep them from being discouraged, it will help keep them on the path to you. And when someone asks us for help, for guidance, let us never give them a snake or a scorpion. Finally, may we give an inheritance to everyone we meet, an inheritance that, because it reflects the forgiveness and generosity and regeneration offered by Jesus Christ, will last for countless generations. Amen.