

## Message: "Reality's Malleability Requirement"

Scripture: I Corinthians 7:29-31

<sup>29</sup>I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, <sup>30</sup>and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, <sup>31</sup>and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Last week, I introduced you to one of my first loves - which was a car, my first car, as a matter of fact. It was a 1977 Jeep CJ5 which I bought in 1984. It was, how shall we say it, not a pretty car - it had rust spots on its sides, a few dents in its body, paint missing in several spots, and a couple of broken lenses covering turn signals. It was, how shall we say it, not a comfortable car - the stiff springs made any ride a kidney buster, its soft top and gap-filled doors made the weather inside the vehicle pretty much the same as what was outside (let me put it this way - when it was raining, I wore a raincoat; when it was freezing, I used a scraper on the inside of the window), and the design was meant for persons under six feet tall (I was six foot two). It was, how shall we say it, not a quiet car -- the exhaust manifold had a series of cracks and holes in it which produced amplified volume that was unimpeded by the aforementioned flimsy soft top and gap filled doors. It was, how shall we say it, not a mechanic-friendly vehicle - in the four years I had the vehicle, I replaced ball joints and the alternator and the brakes and several light fixtures and the windshield motor and a clutch mount and the water pump and even the radio more than once - it seemed for every hour I drove the vehicle, I spent two hours working on it (and spent twice the money of what I paid for it!). And it was, how shall we say it, not a safe car; it had the unfortunate design elements of a relatively high center of gravity, a relatively narrow wheelbase, and a relatively high death rate due to rollover accidents.

No, that car had a lot of problems.

But I loved that vehicle. I loved it because it could go anywhere. I took it on off-road trails and dry riverbeds and steep shelf roads all over the state of Colorado. I often passed by much more expensive and fancier off road vehicles that were stuck; I even pulled several out from where they had become mired in mud or rivers or some extreme terrain. It seemed to me that my CJ was unstoppable.

Imagine my surprise when I read an article in Four-Wheeler magazine that attributed a CJ5's off-road excellence to a major design flaw, namely, frame components that flexed in what the industry considered an extreme manner. The CJ5 was different from other off-road vehicles in that the high degree of frame flexing enabled a higher degree of traction for the tires; they remained in significantly longer contact with the surface being travelled. This article mentioned, however, that the main danger of the frame flexing is that over time it could cause metal fatigue in welds that held the vehicle together. The article concluded by saying something like "if you want the most capable vehicle for off roading, you need to accept the risk of frame flex failure - and check your vehicle regularly for weld cracking." Dubious advice, no doubt.

But it says much for the value of flexibility in vehicles - it can help increase traction in difficult terrain.

Thus is the value of flexibility in life, as well - it can help increase life's traction in a difficult world.

At least, this is what Paul is saying in our scripture lesson from 1 Corinthians chapter 7: he is advocating the practice of spiritual flexibility. Now, what is spiritual flexibility, you ask? I'll tell you - no, more to the point, Paul tells us, it is the practice of flexing life towards its opposite extreme for the purpose of life and faith management. "Let those who have wives be as though they had none,<sup>30</sup> and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions,<sup>31</sup> and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it." The key words here are "as though." The goal is balancing life through consideration of the extremes that are possible in life, to know that an extreme can be somewhat moderated by moving towards its counterpart meaningfully. Tremendous sorrow is helped by remembering powerful joy; great turmoil can be faced more effectively if peace is taken seriously; hostility tends to wither in the face of determined, unconditional love; what is wrong with the world can find solace and strength by tapping the reserves of what is right with the world.

A simple way to say all of this is that Paul encourages us to bend rather than break. Bend towards opposites; move in the direction of opponents, to see their

point of view; take stock of the contrary experiences of others, not to condemn or judge but to assess who they are and what they face which is different from your experience. Appreciate rather than fear diversity; stretch your mindframe by inviting input from others; look beyond the familiar and personal into the depths of another's experience and worldview. Seeing things from different vantage points always increases awareness and furthers respect, things in short supply these days; it is the flexible mind that sees more.

Likewise, it is the flexible faith that lives more fully in the world God has created.

But it is a particular kind of flexing, a particular kind of bending that faith employs, for the bending is from a foundation that is in no danger of moving. It is from a centeredness in Christ, a foundation of belief, trust, and love of God, that bending is a most helpful practice. Flexibility in faith does not mean that our beliefs are all over the place, pushed this way and that by a fickle world that can't make up its mind; flexibility in faith means that our groundedness in God is so complete that we do not fear its loss, and as such, can ask the questions and think the thoughts and embrace the diversity of the world around us without being reduced to defensiveness or irrationality. Opposites should not threaten a person of faith so much as intrigue them; questions are not detriments to belief but clarifiers and expounders essential for growth; doubts are seen not as the weakness of a mind but the integrity of an honest life searching for truth - and unwilling to settle for answers that may be convenient but lack integrity.

The greatest success in life, the greatest happiness possible, the greatest ability to face tragedy and loss, the greatest capacity for compassion, the greatest redress to injustice belong to those whose souls are flexible in this world of tremendous complexity and diversity. They do not shatter when struck; they absorb the uncertain as a meaningful part of life; they sit with questions without forcing convenient answers; their temperament is warm when facing the icy coldness of despair or the raging inferno of hatred. Faith promotes all of these dispositions; faith introduces us to the grounding that enables our adaptability to the world around us.

One last thought - I recently came across an article in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS). PNAS is the peer reviewed journal of the

National Academy of Sciences (NAS), and is one of the largest and most-cited multidisciplinary scientific journals in the world; it publishes exceptional research in all branches of the biological, physical, and social sciences.

This article I found on their website was 26 pages long, filled with scientific jargon and polysyllabic terminology that would give any normal person a headache after five minutes - but have no fear, I am not going to read it here. It was the title that caught my eye. I did read most of the article, and it affirmed what the title of the article implied. The title of the article was "The plasticity of well-being: A training-based framework for the cultivation of human flourishing." And there it is - well-being involves plasticity, the ability to bend and flex with the realities around us. "The plasticity of Well-Being" - what a powerful way to put it! But I must confess - I like Paul's way of saying it better!

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