

A BEDROCK OF PRINCIPLES, A STRONG MORAL COMPASS AND LEAVING A LEGACY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Back in 1874, a member of the New York prison board noticed that 6 people from the same family were serving in the New York prisons. He was intrigued by this and so he did a study. He traced the family line back to a man by the name of Max Juice. Max was born in 1720 and was known around town as the “troublemaker.” He was an alcoholic, he had no integrity, no character, no belief in God. He married a woman that was just like him. They had 6 daughters and 2 sons. Approximately 1200 of their descendants were studied. Among them 310 were homeless, 180 wrecked their lives through drugs and alcohol, 160 were prostitutes, 150 were criminals that spent time in prison, 7 of them for murder.

Around that same time another family was studied, the Jonathan Edwards family. You may remember that he was a theologian, a pastor and president of Princeton University. He was born in 1703. He and his wife Sarah had 11 children. They stayed married 31 years until his death. Approximately 1400 of his descendants were studied. Among them, 13 were college presidents, 65 were professors, 100 were attorneys, 72 were state judges, 85 were authors of books, 66 were physicians and 80 held public office, including 3 governors, 3 US senators and one Vice President.

Do you notice what a difference there is in what is being passed down? Maybe you are here today with a Max Juice lineage behind you. Maybe all you saw growing up was abuse, anger and a negative outlook on life. But thank God today marks the beginning of a new day and the good news is that you can be the one to make a difference in the legacy of your family line. Our calling today is to seek to be the “Jonathan Edwards” of our family tree.

In our reading this morning from the Book of Deuteronomy, we are told to “... choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” What we have to remember is that the choices we make don’t affect just us, they affect our descendants. We need to think generationally. We need to ask, “What am I passing down? What kind of legacy am I leaving? A legacy of selfishness, defeat, negativity? Or am I leaving a legacy of giving, of helping others, am I kind to people, do I have a positive outlook on life?”

So, what does it take to leave a Jonathan Edwards legacy?

First, our lives must be built on a solid bedrock of principles. We must have a solid foundation of principles and beliefs that do not change. Our principles must be the same regardless of the situation, regardless of who is in our presence. People of principle do not transform their foundation to satisfy those around them.

As Christians, we are given our bedrock of principles early on in the Book of Exodus. We are given ten commands. The first three Commandments concern our relationship with God while the remaining seven direct our relations with other people. These Commandments are the

embodiment, the very essence of our duty to God and to our neighbors. God tells us in Exodus 20 that he will show steadfast love to those who love him and keep his commandments. Using this as our bedrock of principles, we are able to establish other principles on which we base our lives. Principles such as love of family, love of learning, love of beauty and love of others.

Moses gave us the tablets with the Ten Commandments, but Jesus broke it down to only two. In the 22nd Chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love our God with all our heart, soul and mind. But then He says, "And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Our vision should be to have a loving and positive attitude toward people. Now, I know it is easy for us to get down on people, to lose faith in people. I read about a man who was having trouble sleeping. He visited with his doctor and told him he could not sleep at night. His doctor said, "Your problem is you are taking your troubles to bed with you." The man said, "I know, but I just can't get my wife to sleep by herself."

Loving our neighbor means to honor and respect those around us. An artist was painting a series of pictures of Bible characters. He was preparing to paint the prophet Isaiah and he looked for a model. Out on the street he found an old wino with grey hair and a full beard. He offered him five dollars if he would pose for him. The old man agreed. When the painting was finished, the artist showed it to the old man and told him about the life of Isaiah. The artist said, "I have chosen you for my model because you could be like Isaiah; a man of God, full of goodness and love." A few weeks later the old man came back to see the artist. He was all cleaned up and sober. He said, "I want to thank you for what you did for me the other day. You believed in me. I want you to know I have decided to become the man that you saw in me." We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, to live on a bedrock of principles.

Second, we must have a strong moral compass. We all know of people of integrity; people with a strong moral compass. We look up to them, we honor them, we want to be like them. A moral compass guides us like the North Star through the dark forests of our lives. People of integrity are true to their word; they are the same in private as they are in public. They don't go out and treat their friends and co-workers kindly and then go home and treat their family rudely or disrespectfully.

A man tells of an experience he had when he and a co-worker traveled out of town days to a convention. They were sharing the same hotel room. As soon as they got to their room, they unpacked their bags. This man was amazed when he saw his friend unpacking pictures and setting them on the dresser. Here were framed pictures of his wife, his children, even his mother and father. The man asked, "Do you take those pictures everywhere you go?" His friend replied, "You know, when I am at home, it is fairly easy for me to do what I know is right. But when I get away on a trip like this, there are lots of temptations and I want to be the best person I can be, even when I am away from home. I bring these pictures of my family because just looking at them inspires me to do what is right, and good and fine."

Some years ago, Winona and I traveled to New Orleans to a dance camp. We got a room on Bourbon Street and were looking forward to enjoying the city. But when the sun went down, Bourbon Street became a jungle. People who seemed to be respectable, were well dressed, who

walked with pride, suddenly changed into something different. Bourbon street became a street of moral decay not just because of the businesses but because of the changes it made in the visitors. It seemed that many people checked their identity, their sense of right and wrong, their moral compass, at the entrance to Bourbon Street.

We are called to be better than that. How we live our lives affects not just us, but those around us. We must live a life of excellence through example. We must know that in whatever we do in life, people are watching. As Christians, we really do not have the luxury of saying, “This I my life and I can live it the way I want.” No, God calls us to a higher standard. We need to respond to God’s call to excellence. The choices we make affect those around us. People are watching. Especially our children, our grandchildren and other young people. They are like little video cameras on legs and they are always on the “record” mode. They learn more from what we do than from what we say. When we are tempted to compromise and take the easy way out, we must accept God’s challenge and make the right choices. This is what I mean by living with a strong moral compass.

And finally, to leave a Jonathan Edwards legacy we must live generationally. Somebody once said, “You never really make a choice alone. You are always taking your mother and your daughter with you.” In other words, we are always changing the future and we are always affecting the past. The choices we make today affect the reputations of our children and the reputation of those who went before us. Have you ever heard someone say, “If your grandmother could see you today, she would turn over in her grave!” When you are tempted to do something questionable, just think of having your mother on one side and your daughter on the other, because that is who you are affecting.

Back in Bible times people took their family lineage a lot more seriously than we do today. The Bible will often not only tell us where a person is from, but his whole family line. When they prayed, they prayed to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They continuously reminded themselves of who went before them. They said to God, “You remember Abraham and how much you loved him? You remember Isaac and my great-great-great-grandfather Jacob and how they served you? Really, it is a powerful thing to be able to look back and tell God how he has been served for generations.

We don’t often hear this today. Sometimes we don’t even know the real history of our grandparents, let alone earlier generations. Maybe it is because we are not very proud of our family heritage. You may say, “Don’t look at my family tree. You will see my family is like a bowl of breakfast cereal. If you take out all the fruits and the nuts, you still have a bowl of flakes.” But you can be the one to turn it around. In generations to come, people may study your family tree and see 15 generations of mediocrity, but when they come to your name, they will say, “Here is where it all turned around.”

Who knows how many times in our lives God has shown us mercy because we have a praying wife, or because we have a mother that loved God, or maybe a great grandfather who lived a holy life?

My Grandfather was the son of Jacob Calahill Beckner. He and his wife, Elizabeth, had 10 children. The family was known throughout west-central Kansas as troublemakers. One of the sons died in Leavenworth and two others had spent time in prison. But my grandfather took a different path. He became a pastor in the Pilgrim Holiness Church, pejoratively known as the “Holy Rollers”. He was a man of God. He lived a life of integrity and he transferred those traits down to his children. My father and his brother and two sisters were people of integrity, who had a strong moral compass and who loved the Lord. I know that because of my grandfather, and my grandmother, that God has taken care of me and that he will take care of my children, and their children, even for one thousand generations.

I like the story of Rahab found in the Book of Joshua. She was a harlot and a prostitute. She came from a family with a long line of immorality. One day, Joshua and the people of Israel were ready to attack the city of Jericho where Rahab lived. Joshua sent in two men to spy out the land. They got stuck in the city at night and needed a place to stay. Rahab hid them in her home. We are told that she learned from these spies that the God of Israel was the true God. That night, she took a stand for what was right and built a bedrock of principle. She focused her moral compass and made a decision that night to serve the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When Joshua attacked and the walls of Jericho came tumbling down, not only was Rahab and her entire family spared, but she broke that curse of immorality that had plagued her family for so many generations.

In our Scripture reading for this morning from the Book of Exodus, it says, “I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the father upon the children to the third and fourth generation.” Now, God is not talking here about making mistakes. We all make mistakes but we do our best to change, to try and not make the same mistake again. That is different from the iniquities referenced in Exodus. An iniquity is where we do not try to change; where our mistakes become habits, addictions, negative thinking – where our mistakes become our life style. These are the iniquities that we pass down to the third and fourth generation.

But look what happens when we live a life of blessings. The reading from Exodus goes on to say that God is faithful and He will keep the covenant of mercy with those who love him and obey his commands unto a thousand generations. Notice here that through our iniquities, our actions affect our children for three or four generations. But when we love God, when we choose to make the decisions to do what is right, God promises he will show your family mercy for a thousand generations.

This is what God did for Rahab. Do you remember the rest of the story? Rahab ended up marrying a Jewish man named Solomon and they had a child named Boaz. Boaz married Ruth and they had a son named Obed. Obed had a son named Jessie, Jessie had a son named David and as you know, David became the king of Israel. And if you look back, you will see that Rahab, the former prostitute, is in the lineage of Jesus. The decisions made by Rahab changed her entire family tree. She lived generationally.

The point I am trying to make is that each of us can make a difference in the legacy of our family line. Remember our reading from the Book of Deuteronomy where we are told to “... choose life

so that you and your descendants may live.” We must know that no matter what kind of family we come from, if we build our life on a bedrock of solid principles, if we have a worthy vision in life and establish a strong moral compass, and if we think generationally, then we may create the Jonathan Edwards legacy in our family and bring a life of blessings to our families and to our descendants, yes, even to a thousand generations.