

## "If Experience Is Such A Good Teacher, Why Do I have to Keep Repeating the Course"

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### KALLAM GROVE CHRISTIAN CHURCH PULPIT

Texts: Philippians 4: 8-13; Romans 8:35-39

***Paul to the Philippians:** "I have learned to be content in any circumstance. I know the experience of being in need, and of having more than enough...I can endure all these things because of the One who gives me strength. If anything is excellent and admirable, focus your thoughts on these things--all that is true...holy...just...pure...lovely...worthy of praise. Practice what you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of Peace will be with you."*

***Paul to the Romans:** "what shall separate us from Christ's love. Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? **NO!** In all these things we can earn a sweeping victory through the **ONE** who loved us."*

We all know the saying, "Experience is the best teacher." Did I say, "best teacher?" Yes, that is the old saying, but it is not always true. Indeed, experience is not necessarily even a good teacher. I don't know much about Whitney Houston except that she grew up in a Baptist church where she still sang occasionally, and she became the "queen of pop." However, for Whitney Houston, experience was not a good teacher. Indeed, dying early at age 48 meant that after years of going through similar experiences, her life ended tragically. Drugs and alcohol took her to an early grave as they do 100,000 Americans every year.

I read once of the wise and successful banker who was retiring after years of being a successful president. Upon his retirement he led his young successor into his walnut paneled office that was empty except for his briefcase sitting on a clean desktop. He picked up his briefcase, shook the young man's hand and left. The young man chased him to the elevator. "Sir, before you go would you please tell me **what is the secret of your success?**" The retiring man said, "**Good decisions.**" The young man thanked him and started back to the executive office, then turned with a slightly confused look on his face and said, "But sir, how do I know how to make good decisions?" The older man said, "**Experience.**" The young man thanked him, the elevator came and the older man stepped in only to be shocked that the young man's arm made the door re-open and joined him in the elevator. Breathlessly, the young man said, "But sir, in following you with all your years in this job, how do I learn to make good decisions with such a short time of experience?" The answer was again short: "**Bad decisions.**"

So that is something of a formula for success--**good decisions come from experience that teaches us the consequences of bad decisions.** Actually, "experience" is not a course; it is a curriculum. Like school, we are taking several subjects all at once and doing well in some while really having to work hard in others. Most of us have a job or career in which our experiences have very little overlap with our home life, our marriage, our relationship with our children, or our relationship with the church. Some people have successful business careers, invest wisely, make a lot of money, and reap the benefits. However, in their home life or their personal life, they do not use experience to teach them good lessons for making the right decisions. Their marriage is in trouble; their kids hardly know their dad or mom, or they are simply not happy.

I wish it were true that Christian people who come to church are being led by the Holy Spirit in interpreting their life experiences and making good decisions, but this does not happen. In my many years of ministry, I have never been asked how a person could turn his business around, or whether it was time to buy or sell a stock, or how a widow should invest her money. **What I have been asked is "how can I turn my life around?"** How can

I save my marriage?" "What can I do with my teenage daughter?" and "How do I keep on living without my marriage partner?" My role has been with people whose playbook suggestions no longer brought wins, people whose dreams did not come true, people whose lives were battered and shattered by bad decisions on their part or on the part of someone significant in their lives. **No, experience is not always a good teacher or we would not keep repeating the course.**

Another dimension of experience is the enticement to yield to the temptation of being hyper-critical of friends having experiences quite different from our own. We judge them from the perspective of our own life experience. We all have heard the proverbial saying of the Sioux Indians: "Before you criticize a brave, walk in his moccasins three days." But so often, we don't do that. Rather we say, **"Instead of how they did it, I would do it this way."** Even when people are down on their luck, need a hand up, and are at their wit's end, we still look down from our 'mountain' and say, "You should not have got in such a mess; you made your bed; you lie in it." Or we say, "Let your family help you."

St. Paul urged us to "let the mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus." Well, what did Jesus do? The startling thing about Jesus was his willingness to identify with other people's pain. He drove the religious folks crazy by healing the son of a Roman soldier, blessing Mary Magdalene when others put her down, and defining what it means to be a neighbor by telling a story in which a Samaritan was the epitome of the word "neighbor."

You remember the parable of the Good Samaritan. It did not make preachers, priests and church officers look very noble because they did not stop to help the man who had been robbed and beaten, even bleeding to death. They had other things to do--good things, godly things, religious things. Like us, maybe they were headed to a beautiful home with a fabulous meal and a quiet evening of sitting by the fire. So, they passed down the other side of the road. **Experience is not always a good teacher because we spend our lives studying the wrong questions and answers and, as a consequence, we are shocked to struggle with the final exam!** If we have not had time or "heart" for others, we might find ourselves very lonely in our latter days and embarrassed with what is asked of us at the "Pearly Gates."

We often call "Experience University" the "school of hard knocks." That is not accurate because nearly all of us have been blessed more than we appreciate. We have had more helping hands pulling us up than hurting hands that pushed us down. We have had more opportunities than any generation in any nation in the history of the world. WE are a blessed people. Our golden text for today is from Jesus: "To whom much is given, much will be required." That is, the Christian response to being blessed is to be a blessing! How many secret recipients of our generosity and kindness will show up at our funeral? Or will we be known only for

- how shrewd we were,
- or how smart we were,
- or how successful we were,
- or how much we accumulated before we die?

### **Courses in "Experience University"**

So, if experience is a lifelong curriculum, let's look at some of the courses in whose classrooms we have been in and courses we must still take at this Experience University of Life.

1. **Love:** We have been in the class called "LOVE."

Life is not all hard knocks; we all enroll in the "Experience U" class called "Love." Love comes naturally; hate must be learned. The Bible on page one says we were made in the image of God and near the end of the Good Book (I John 4:8, 17), **God is finally defined in one word--"God is LOVE."** So, God's image of love is imprinted in our spiritual DNA just as much as our ancestors' give us our physical features. Most of us have

experienced love at various stages of life. Most were loved as children. Most of us have been loved by and supported by family members in our lifetime. Even people who were raised from pillar to post, not loved or often abused as children, **still have the urge to love and be loved.** This is true of all God's creatures; even stray dogs want someone to love them. In some measure, everyone has some love experience.

One thing we learn in the class on "Love" is that love means responsibility and reciprocity. Love is risky; if you love, you may get hurt. All forms of love are measured by the long haul of caring, sharing, crying, praying, hoping, dreaming, fearing, doubting, and trusting. **Love is like the Biblical manna; horde it and it will spoil.** In the wise words from Oscar Hammerstein: "A song is not a song until you sing it. Love in your heart was not put there to stay; love is not love until you give it away."

Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not pagans do the same? Just as your Heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so you also can be complete."  
Matthew 5:43-48

## 2. **Success**--the "fun" course that is always packed out and that our parents urge us to take!

Well, let's go to another course in "Experience University." This is a fun course that is always crammed. We have been told since childhood that we must take this course and make an "A." This is called SUCCESS.

But it is hard to "ace" this course because we have difficulty defining terms. What is success? Experience teaches us that success is a slippery eel, hard to hold onto. People who equate success with ambition and promotion and money often make it only to see it slip away. If we do not carry what we learned in the class on "LOVE" to the class on SUCCESS, we will not ever discover the secret to our own success.

As I said, success is hard to define. From my first church in the middle 50's, my wife, Joan and I, have a friend who will turn 95 this year. His work was in a textile mill--a low hourly wage, no pension. In 1944, they bought a small tract of land with a house that is the same today as when we ate dozens of meals there over fifty years ago. It still does not have air conditioning. He and his wife lived very frugally, lived quiet lives, were known only by direct acquaintances, certainly never had public acclaim or media attention. Their only grandchild, a girl, was severely challenged, mentally and physically. Her parents and grandparents took her 25 miles a day to Guilford County's only school that could work with her needs.

Their daughter died at age twelve; then I had to have the funeral of her mother, Doris. Thurman lived to be ninety years old. When the county wanted to build a new school for the mentally and physically challenged, they secured his little farm for that school. When it opened, Thurman drove his pickup down every morning to meet every school bus and help every child get off with crutches or wheelchairs or severely mental challenges who needed help. Once he saw that every child was safely in the school, he went to the gym, sat on the floor and helped the teachers with the children's activities. Twice, he was featured in full page articles in the High Point Enterprise newspaper for his dedication. He became the Guilford County Board of Education "Volunteer of the Year". In front of the school, the teachers helped the children write on a huge graffiti stone, "Thurman rocks." This school was their family's legacy.

So, what is success? Everyone can be successful; it does not take money and worldly fame.

Do you know the name, "Clement Moore"? He was a professor of Oriental and Greek Literature at Columbia University for twenty-nine years; does that ring a bell? **No.** Well, he wanted his success to be measured by the Hebrew Dictionary he edited and the books and poems he published. One Christmas he wrote a juvenile little poem for his children and was embarrassed when someone published it. That became his surprise package of success--"Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse." Success comes in surprise packages!

### 3. Defeat: (the required course no one wants to take )

There is one more course that you must take before you graduate from the University of Experience. No one wants to take it but it is required for graduation. It is called "DEFEAT."

Sorry, but if we win all the time, **or** if we are so self centered that we **think** we are winning, we fool ourselves. If your defeat has not yet come, let 's do a reality check. Are you part of the human race? Then, you have likely experienced defeats-- disappointments, hurt, rejection, pain, or grief. Indeed, too many victories can make us unkind and insensitive to the feelings of others

Yes, it happens to Christians. Yes, it happens to preachers! Some people do not learn from their defeats; they conveniently forget them. If you are unable to keep in touch with the sting of defeat, you will be unkind, hard hearted, harsh, selfish, and downright mean spirited.

However, defeat can be overcome. In psychology it is called "sublimation." Defeats deny us of original goals, but we can use them to create new goals, new values, and new visions. Defeat can be a teacher. Don't forget your defeats, learn from them. St. Paul had what he called a "thorn in the flesh" that he prayed would be relieved, but it never was. (*II Corinthians 12:7-9*) He also says he was "beaten...imprisoned...received forty lashes...stoned...shipwrecked, ...faced dangers in the city, in the desert, on the sea, and from false brothers and sisters." He spoke of "sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, and in the cold without adequate clothing."

I say to myself and to each of you: **We can relate to each other out of our defeats, our weaknesses, our experiences that seemed to be failure. They can mellow us, soften us, make us gracious and empathetic, perfect us in grace, and give us lasting peace to the last. If we focus on the defeats, our soul will shrivel into a spiritual prune.** The civil rights era spiritual was right, "We can overcome."

Remember the words of Paul to the Romans: **"What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress, persecution or famine, or peril or sword? No! In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or politicians, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

Rather let your experience teach you to focus on "all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these that you have learned at "Experience University" when God was with you! Amen.