

“Meeting God in the Stages of Life: Youth”

This is the second in a series of messages I call “Meeting God in the Stages of Life”. We are looking at the various stages we pass through in life, the tasks we need to accomplish in order to move through that stage in healthy way, and how faith in Christ can help us. In last week’s sermon we looked at the childhood years, and how children are almost entirely dependent on adults for their life and to teach them of God. Today we will look at youth, those who are between the ages of 12 and 18.

Do you remember what it was like to be a teenager? I don’t know about you, but my teen years were at times awkward and uncertain. Yes there were fun times and happy memories from my youthful years. But some of what I experienced back then was scary, and confusing, as I tried to grow up and figure out who I was.

There is a lot happening during adolescence. To get the feel for the changes that take place in a very short span of time, think of the difference between a 12 year old and an 18 year old! There are changes in one’s body: hormones kick in, and there can be extreme mood swings – up and down. Spurts of growth take place, when the teenager’s body seems out of control. And there are all these sexual feelings – sometimes like they’re just taking over.

Developmentally, what’s supposed to happen during these teen years? In other words, what has to be completed in order to move on successfully to the next stage of life? Several of the most important tasks of this stage are to define the self – as separate from one’s parents, and to move out of being dependent on one’s family of origin (emotionally, economically), to get “launched” so the young person can be on their own. By the way, this is taking longer and longer in our society. Sometimes parents forget that their job is to launch their children so they can be their own person. For varied reasons, some parents have trouble letting their children go.

I’m not sure being an adolescent was ever easy, but I certainly think it is a lot harder today. On top of all the rapid changes taking place *within* a teenager, the world teens are growing up in today is not the same as the world in which many of us grew up. In my teen years, the “bad” things kids got into were smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, and having sex. These are still with us, but now kids have to contend with illegal drugs (marijuana, cocaine, heroin, etc.)...AIDS (and an epidemic of other sexually transmitted diseases)...more kids are growing up in single-parent homes or families with step-parents. There are the hazards of the internet...and one can view almost anything today in films, cable TV, and the internet. Also, American youth growing up today are growing up in a culture where traditional morality is giving way to moral relativism, where the boundaries of right and wrong are no longer made clear. So much more could be said, but the bottom line is: *it isn’t easy being a teenager!*

Maybe parents having a teenager in the house would say, “Well, it isn’t easy being a teenager’s mom or dad either! Having a teenager around can make life interesting! Often teenagers are in conflict with parents. Some of this is *normal* – because a teenager is beginning to develop his or her own ideas, thoughts, and feelings – which can be *quite different* from mom or dad’s.

It certainly helps to keep a sense of humor about it! Humorist and author, Dave Barry, in one

of his columns wrote this about his son: “The last thing I said to my teenage son as I put him on the plane for Europe was: ‘Don't lose your passport!’ The second-to-the-last thing I said was: ‘Don't lose your passport!’ In fact, if you were to analyze all the statements I made to my son in the week before his departure, they'd boil down to: ‘Don't lose your passport!’

“The message I was trying to convey was that he should not lose his passport. Of course he did not need to be told this. He is a teenage boy, and teenage boys already know everything. When a boy reaches 13 years of age, the Knowledge Fairy comes around and inserts into his brain all the information in the entire universe. From that point on, he no longer needs any parental guidance. All he needs is parental money.

“This is why a teenage boy who has had a driver's license for a total of two hours knows that he can drive 367 miles per hour in heavy traffic while devoting 2 percent of his attention to the actual road and 98 percent to the critical task of adjusting the radio to exactly the right volume setting...if you criticize him, he'll give you a look of contempt mixed with pity, because you are a clueless old dork who was last visited by the Knowledge Fairy in 1873, and your brain has been leaking information ever since.

“And so, when I told my son, as he got onto the plane, not to lose his passport, he rolled his eyes in the way that knowledgeable teenagers have rolled their eyes at their parents dating back to when Romeo and Juliet rolled THEIR eyes at THEIR parents for opposing a relationship that turned out really swell, except that they wound up fatally stabbing and poisoning themselves.

“At this point, you veteran parents are asking: ‘So, when did your son lose his passport?’ The answer is: before he legally got into Europe. He may have set an Olympic record for passport-losing, because apparently his was stolen, along with all his traveler's checks, while he was on the plane. Don't ask me how this could happen. My son has tried to explain it to me, but I still don't understand, because I have a leaky old brain.”

I won't spend a lot of time in this message talking about parent-teen relationships, but let me just say a couple of things I think are really important. First of all, ***remember, teenagers need their parents (in spite of what they may say)***. They long for a meaningful relationship with their mother and father. I have counseled with young people whose parents act in some of the worst ways one can imagine, yet deep down these children still long for their parents' love. Kids need a mom; kids need a dad.

One of most important things for parents to keep in mind is this: keep communication open! Parents: *listen to your son or daughter!* Be available. Spend time with your teenager (even if they act like they don't want you around). But gradually back off, so your son or daughter can develop into their own person, and begin to live their own life.

Joe Volupas, a school teacher and newspaper columnist, once gave 100 of his students, ages 14-17, an index card on which he invited them to tell their parents anything they had on their mind, good or bad. He described some of the teenagers answers in a column in the Lancaster news-

paper. Here are some of the things his students wrote:

“Dear Mom: I wish we didn’t fight. I love ya, but it’s hard to show it when you’re always mad at me for little reasons. I wish we were friends and we could talk about everything. I could use another friend.” *Your daughter*”

“Dear Mom & Dad: Your little girl is growing up. Give me space.” *Your daughter*

“Dear Dad: Thanks for supporting me by participating in what I do.” *Your son.*

“Dear Mom: Stop trying to pick my friends. Your friends aren’t angels either.”
Your daughter

“Dear Dad: Do you think you can stop putting work before us? We need you at home too” *Your daughter*

“Dear Mom: You are my role model. I am lucky to have you.” *Your daughter*

“Dear Mom and Dad: Stop fighting and putting me in the middle. Grow up. Act like parents.” *Your son*

“Dear Mom and Dad: Stop pushing me to be something I am not.” *Your son*

“Dear Dad: Thanks for raising me by yourself the best you could.” *Your son*
“P.S. Mom, why did you leave me?”

“Dear Mom and Dad: Even though I act like I don’t like it, thank-you for making every Sunday “Family Day”. *Your daughter*

Let’s shift gears. I want to spend the rest of my message today sharing thoughts around this question: ***If I could be a teenager again, knowing what I do now, how would I try to live those years?*** A little note here: I realize that most teenagers have no interest in what I have to say; they would immediately tune me out (if they haven’t already!). How could a guy my age have anything worthwhile to say to them! But I will go ahead and say it anyway!

First, if I could live my teen years again I’d try to accept myself more as a unique and special creation of God. So many teenagers are down on themselves. It’s hard not to be, if they compare themselves to other kids. Or to teenage stars of pop culture. So many youth wish they were smarter, or prettier, or more muscular, or taller, or thinner, or more popular, and so on. I didn’t have very high self-esteem when I was in my teen years. There was this time when I was feeling really low. And I remember sitting at the kitchen table with my dad. He didn’t have any counseling skills. He wasn’t very spiritual at the time and didn’t go to church. He was just a machinist at Armstrong. But basically he said I ought to accept myself, that that’s the way the good Lord made me. Years later, I still remember those words of encouragement.

I had a friend in high school named Albert. He usually sat back of me in class – his last name also started with a K. He wasn't in the group that was most popular. He wasn't outstanding in sports. He didn't have girls chasing him. But he had an amazing way of being at ease with himself. He didn't put on a front. He had an easy, natural manner about him. He seemed to know who he was, and was comfortable with who he was. I kind of envied that in him.

Each of us is a unique and special creation of God. God thought enough of you not to create anyone else just like you. Jesus cares enough for you that He gave up His life for you! Psalm 139:14 says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Even if you've gotten a message from your parents or others that you are not worth much or will never amount to anything, you are wonderfully and fearfully made! God sees you as special, and has things for you to do on earth that no one else can do!

Secondly, if I could be a teenager again, I'd choose the right kind of friends. In my Junior High years, my closest buddies weren't really bad kids, but neither were they good, clean living, church-going kids. Of course, I wanted to be like them and be accepted, so I did what they did. I thought I was cool, but some of the habits I got into at that formative stage have been hard to break. Later on, I developed a new circle of friends, who were more interest in church and spiritual things. Sometimes we hear things like, "Well, she runs around with these friends who aren't a very good influence on her", or "Since he started hanging around with that dirtball of a kid, he's changed." These kinds of comments can at times be unkind, but there can be truth in them. An unwise choice of friends can lead us down wrong paths. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.'" If I could be a teenager again, I'd be more careful in choosing my friends.

And then too, I'd try to develop moral boundaries and a moral game plan. There are a lot of kids growing up today without any moral markers. They pattern their behaviors and values after the culture (what everyone else is doing), or pop culture hero they idolize. But there are some behaviors that represent stupid choices and lead us down an unhappy path – and it's good to decide ahead of time where our moral boundaries are going to be set.

For instance, the time to decide to avoid alcohol or drugs is not when you are partying with friends and they're encouraging you to do what they're doing. The time to set those boundaries is before that, and not to put yourself into such a vulnerable position. The time to say "no" to teenage sex is not when you are alone in a car or bedroom with a boy or girl, and your passions are heating up - but to stop before you get to the place where your emotions take over.

Titus 2:6 says, "Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled." 2 Timothy 2:22 says, "Shun youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." It's a wise young person who has determined a moral game plan on where to draw the lines, so it can reduce the risk that you will get in over your head and do something that you will regret.

Even though in our culture the Bible is increasingly being dismissed and downplayed as God's

Word, it still provides a moral compass for the young and old. Psalm 119:9 tells us, “How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word.”

Finally, if I were a teenager again, I'd hitch my wagon to a worthy star! One of the thrilling things about the teen years is that one has his or her whole life ahead of them. Teenagers have the opportunity to shape their future: where they are going to live, what kind of career they will choose, who they are going to marry. And perhaps most important, they can choose their ***philosophy of life*** – what they are going to believe in, what they will give their life to.

So many teenagers (and adults!) hitch our wagons to the wrong kinds of star when it comes to what we're going to live for: pleasure...material things...self-centered goals of personal success. One of the most positive things I ever did as a teenager was to hitch my wagon to a star named Jesus the Christ. He became my Role Model, my Hero. There is no one better suited for that role than Him!

Sometimes we minimize the importance that youth can play in the kingdom of God, and the leadership role they can play! Paul wrote to the young man Timothy, “Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” 1 Timothy 4:12. Notice, he was to set an example for the adults! I have known many teenagers in churches I've served who have put some of us adults to shame with their commitment to Jesus Christ as a teenager!

Jeremiah was just a youth when God consecrated him to be a prophet. “Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you”’ (Jeremiah 1:4-7). I was a teenager when I was first appointed by a bishop to pastor a Methodist congregation! You remember Cassie Bernall? Cassie was one of those shot to death in the Columbine High School shooting. Do you remember she was asked by the gunman whether she believed in God, and when she said yes, he pulled the trigger. Cassie was only a teenager when she took a stand for her faith in Christ and provided for our nation a stunning example of one's willingness to live for Christ and die for Christ!

The good news is that when young people are willing to give their lives over to Christ, He comes to live in them, and He provides resources to get them through those wonderful, awful teenage years! Even youth can sometimes be wearied by the burdens, problems, and sorrows of life. But listen to God's promise: “Have you not known, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary; and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:28-31).

There are some things I did in my teen years that I would do differently if had to live those years over again. But one thing I did back then that I would do all over again: I would hitch my wagon to a worthy star – Jesus, Savior, and Lord of all creation!

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