

Introduction

Most of you are familiar with the frog in the kettle hypothesis. Place a frog in a kettle of boiling water. He'll feel pain and immediately jump out. In contrast, place him in a kettle of room temperature water and he'll stay there, comfortable and contented. But then very slowly increase the temperature of the water. Surprisingly, he'll remain in it. He doesn't know it's getting hotter because his body is adjusting to the increase in temperature. Finally, the water is boiling and the frog is too, killed by his own ability to adjust to the environment around him.

The frog in the kettle hypothesis, by way of analogy, teaches us a crucial insight about human beings. We have an almost unlimited capacity to adjust, to our detriment, and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to Exodus 14:5-14.

Adjustment

The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for over 400 years, and born all the indignities that went along with it. But then God delivered them. He sent Moses and through him inflicted ten plagues on the Egyptians. After the tenth, Pharaoh let the Israelites go. Shortly thereafter, however, he changed his mind and pursued them with his army to take them back if they didn't resist or to destroy them if they did.

Verses 10-12 record the Israelites' response. They panicked, prayed, and turned on Moses. They reminded him of what they told him initially in Egypt, **"Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians."** They then added about their current plight, **"For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."**

Inherent in that complaint of theirs is a striking ability that human beings have. Consider the dreadfulness of slavery. It's one of the most demeaning and dispiriting of all human experiences. It's so dreadful that Patrick Henry said, **"Give me liberty or give me death."** Better death than subjugation and slavery. But the Israelites disagreed. As dreadful

as slavery is, they had grown accustomed to it. They had actually learned to live with and tolerate it, so much so in fact that they didn't want to leave it. Better subjugation and slavery than death.

The Israelites illustrate a remarkable ability that human beings have. It's the ability to adjust just as the frog in the kettle does. We're able to adapt to the circumstances we're in, no matter how bad they are.

Some years ago, a group of Malone College students spent their Christmas vacation on a ministry trip in Chicago. One day, they were given a dollar each. They were then dropped off early in a part of the city where the homeless lived and picked up late that night. The point of the exercise was to experience firsthand what being homeless is like.

After it was over, one of the students expressed his surprise at the number of capable homeless people he met, who had the intelligence and abilities to escape street life but didn't. He then explained that in these terms: **"I think they have adjusted to the indignities and despair of life on the streets."** That was an astute observation on his part.

The truth is that human beings have an almost unlimited capacity to adjust. We're able to get used to and to tolerate most circumstances no matter how awful they are. A retired person adjusts to inactivity and boredom. An abused wife adjusts to degradation. A teacher with an unruly class adjusts to disorder. A lazy student adjusts to mediocrity. A sinning Christian adjusts to disobedience. And on it goes. Human beings have an almost unlimited capacity to adjust to their environments.

A Downward Movement

But there's a problem with that. Let's go back to the frog in the kettle. He wasn't better off because he adjusted. He was worse off, dead in fact. The Israelites weren't either. They weren't better off because they adjusted to slavery. They were worse off. God had an extraordinary plan for them. It was to give them a bountiful land and make them the greatest nation on earth in it. But their adjustment to the degradation of slavery almost kept Him from fulfilling it. It diminished

their character and potential as a nation.

The frog and the Israelites teach us a defining fact of our existence. As Psychologist Renee DuBois explains it, people have **“an infinite capacity to adjust downward.”** The words **“adjust downward”** are insightful. What they imply is true. Adjustment is almost never an upward movement. It’s almost always a downward movement instead. It almost always moves us to lower levels, lower planes, of being and doing.

Dallas Willard once spoke at a conference about the power of prayer. After he finished, a woman, angry and in agony and tears, came to him and explained what her problem was. At one time, she believed what Willard taught, that there’s supernatural power in prayer, and tried her best to make it work in her life. But she failed, for whatever reasons, to do so, which left her feeling deeply guilty and hurt. As a result, and I quote Willard, **“To protect herself she had readjusted her faith to consist of believing in the creeds, helping out at church, and being a good person generally, as that is commonly understood in our society.”** The word **“readjusted”** is an accurate one. Like many Christians, she had adjusted to the lack of power in her spiritual life, a condition that Willard’s message disturbed. Anyway, what I want you to see is this. She wasn’t better off because she did. She was worse off. Her adjustment didn’t enhance her spiritual condition. It diminished it.

We learn an invaluable lesson from her. Adjustment is almost always a downward movement. So, the retired person becomes self-absorbed, the abused wife self-loathing, the challenged teacher disillusioned, the lazy student useless, and the sinning Christian spiritually powerless. There’s no doubt about it. Our character and lives are almost always diminished, not enhanced, when we adjust.

Commitment

So, don’t adjust! Commit instead.

After much prodding from God and Moses, that’s what the Israelites did. God had an extraordinary plan for them, but there were things they

had to do in order to fulfill it. They had to leave the familiarity of life in Egypt behind, travel through and brave the dangers of the wilderness, and then fight and defeat the nations that inhabited the land God gave them. That's what they had to do and they eventually did it. They quit adjusting, in other words, and began committing.

So must we!

Listen to the following maxims, most of which you've either used or heard. Every cloud has a silver lining. Whenever God shuts a door, He opens a window. To every disadvantage, there is a corresponding advantage. There are dividends in every difficulty. There are treasures in every tragedy. There are opportunities in every obstacle. And finally, there are possibilities in every problem.

We immediately grasp what the issue is. Are these maxims just nice talk or are they reality? The answer is, "**They're reality.**" The truth is that no matter how bad our circumstances are, there's almost always something constructive we can do about some aspects of them.

So, we commit ourselves to doing that something constructive. We don't see ourselves as helpless victims who can't really do anything about our circumstances. We don't just passively accept our fate and adjust. We commit ourselves instead to redeeming our circumstances as much as they can possibly be redeemed. We bloom where we're planted in other words. We do three things. First, we identify the silver linings, the opened windows, the dividends, the treasures, the opportunities, or the possibilities in our circumstances. Second, we determine what is necessary to achieve those. And third, we do what is necessary with passion and joy.

An Upward Movement

That is commitment and, I would add, God's will for our lives. Why is that? It's simple really. It's because commitment is an upward movement. Know this and don't ever forget it. The upward movement is never an adjustment. It's always a commitment. Commitment always

moves us to higher levels, higher planes, of being and doing. Our character and lives are always enhanced when we commit.

Stephen Wolin is a professor of clinical psychiatry at George Washington University. For 20 years, he studied 200 families, each of which had at least one alcoholic parent and in some cases, two. He discovered that only 15% of the children in those families became alcoholics themselves. The rest, he reports, **"emerged from their experience in surprisingly good health."** They did so, he contends, by making specific **"commitments"**: (1) Don't see themselves as victims but **"hunker down"** and get to work; (2) Take deliberate measures to protect themselves; (3) Don't see their parents very often; and (4) Create new rituals. Wolin describes the consequence of those commitments, **"Spurred by ghastly memories of holidays, they establish strong, healthy family traditions not linked to the past."** I'd analyze it this way. 15% of the children adjusted – and became alcoholics. The other 85% committed – and became healthy persons and parents.

The morale of the story is clear. Adjustment is almost always a downward movement. Commitment is always an upward movement. So, don't adjust. Commit!

The National Life of America

This coming Thursday is Independence Day. So, I'd like to apply what I've explained today to the national life of America.

One of the significant measures of a nation's health is what the masses who comprise it consider strange. If that is true, which it is, then America is sick. As acclaimed social observer Neil Postman said it, American culture has lost **"the sense of the strange."**

Now, there's a reason it has and Postman identified what that reason is: **"For the loss of the sense of the strange is a sign of adjustment, and the extent to which we have adjusted is a measure of the extent to which we have been changed."** He's right. Like the frog in the kettle, Americans have been adjusting to a slow but sure

decline in spiritual and moral matters. That is of course a downward movement, which has brought us to the place we are today. Our nation, as a whole, has very little sense of what is strange.

A few years ago, Larry King interviewed a highly popular and respected singer-actress who stated that she's a liberal politically and explained why. It's because she has such a deep compassion for the poor. But it's widely known that she lives in several multi-million dollar homes, flies around in a private jet, and stays in \$2800 a night hotel rooms on vacations. That lifestyle makes her claim about her compassion for the poor literally laughable, that is, insane or absurd. But no one laughed or is laughing. Why? It's because America has lost a sense of what is strange. Just watch several nights of sitcoms, dramas, and reality shows on television and you'll see and hear exactly what I mean.

That's the environment in which you and I live out our discipleship to Jesus. And we must make sure, as we do, that we don't adjust to it. That is the ever present temptation we face. It's adjusting to our culture's declining spiritual and moral standards as many Christians have – like one who said, **"I know the Bible says homosexuality is a sin, but it just doesn't feel like it is to me anymore."** We don't give in to the temptation as she did. We commit ourselves to the spiritual and moral standards of the Bible instead. We devote ourselves to doing three things. We learn what those standards are in detail, live them out, and promote them truthfully and lovingly as I explained it last week.

Conclusion

It's vital to our nation's surviving and thriving that we do. Chuck Colson explained why and I quote him in closing. He declared that the best way to **"redeem"** our culture is **"from the inside out – from the individual to the family to the community, and then outward in ever widening ripples."** Notice that redeeming our culture begins with the individual, with you and me. So let's do our part. Don't be like the frog in the kettle. Don't adjust. Commit instead.