

October 12, 2003

“MANAGING THE STRESS OF CHANGE...”

“But understand this, that there will come times of stress...”

II Timothy 3:1

How little did I know, those few months back when I first scheduled the sermon topic for this morning, how much change and stress would have entered the Cromie family circle before I got a chance to preach it. Wow! As I said recently - I do not and will not plead for your sympathy - all God's children have problems and most of them far worse than ours. I plead only for your prayers and kindness. We continue to appreciate the well chosen cards and notes, kind words, and telephone calls so many of you have bestowed upon us since my abrupt hospitalization a few weeks ago. I am on the mend and the long range looks good. Thank you. We still have not received the lasagna or chicken soup I requested, but that's okay, I could not eat them anymore. I have been reduced to carrots and water.

But add to that a serious operation, up at Shands Hospital in Gainesville, on our middle daughter, (things are looking better); some fussing about with proposed retirement plans for Peggy and me; and the good news of things, even if a monumental change in her life, comes the departure of our ministerial daughter Courtney from the church in Boca Raton to a grand new ministerial position in Yorktown, Virginia (quite near Williamsburg.) Congratulations Court! And finally, all of the above changes are insignificant compared to the first days of kindergarten up in Charlotte, for our five year old granddaughter, Madeline. Perhaps her four year brother, Wil, summed it all up perfectly one morning not so long ago when he said something like this “I don't like it now that Madeline left me. When am I going to grow up so I can be in charge of my life?” Good luck Wil'

My topic this morning, announced long long ago is: “Managing the stress of change.” First a little word about how the word stress is being used: a definition. Stress is not an easy word to define. The word itself was originally drawn from the engineering field. It had to do with the pounds of pressure which steel could withstand before breaking. Stress, when transferred to human beings, borrows that casual definition: it is the amount of pressure a person can withstand before breaking. Excessive pressure, perceived or real, can cause physical and emotional turmoil, serious illness, even death.

On the ancient tundra the first humans responded instinctively when danger was near. If possible, they fought to overcome it: to protect their turf, life, food, and the lives of their families. If ancient man felt he could not defend himself successfully, he fled; i.e., he ran as fast as possible from the danger, without feeling guilty or cowardly, without excuses or apologies. “Fight or Flee” is still the phrase we use.

When the evolutionary process turned over a new leaf to our domesticated world, we continued to inherit the built-in responses to deal with danger. But usually, in so-called “civilized society,” they cannot be used in the same way. For example, when your boss criticizes you unfairly, much as you might want to fight or flee, you simply cannot punch him in the nose, or run out the door, not if you want your job. You might want to fight as seventy-two year old Yankee coach Don Zimmer decided to do when he charged onto the field and tried to attack thirty-one year old Red Sox pitcher Martinez.

And, as I said, it would not work with your boss. You have to listen, wrong and unfair as he/she might be. The same is true in traffic disputes, in domestic quarrels, in the encroachment of crime, in altercations with your teachers and friends, even when you disagree with your preacher! The options are limited now. Caught between two almost innate responses, neither of which we can often use, we are forced inward and absorb the stress, rather than release it.

Stress can have an almost diabolical power over the human body. It attacks you at your weakest point. If headaches are your weakness, stress attacks you there. If muscular structure is a weakness, the back for instance, stress attacks you there, almost as if a little demon is on the loose in your bloodstream and knows exactly how and where to stop. What really is happening is that you are hurting yourself. When you do not or cannot release stress effectively, it turns inward. If it is not released in an appropriate or useful manner, it makes you its victim.

The result? In the United States of America there are 24% more deaths by suicide each year than by murder, mostly brought on by stress. 80% of Americans have admitted they have thought about suicide in various levels of seriousness. It is estimated that 70/80% of all office visits to physicians are stress related. The ensuing costs to our society are judged by Lyle H. Miller, MD, in his book on stress, as being in the hundreds of millions of dollars per year, wasted. Dr. Walter McQuade writes in his classic study of stress that “Stress is a shadow which has darkened our lives, as surely as smog has darkened our cities and pollution has darkened our streams.”

What causes stress? The answer is not easy. I have a private theory that “every time anything goes wrong, there are usually a dozen causes, only ten of which you can find no matter how hard and long you look.” That is to say, however much you struggle to know, there is still a mystery as to why things happen as they do. The former is true with stress.

Willy, nilly...we live in a stressful world, with increases in crime, noise, traffic, pollution, immigration, cultural shock, financial troubles, etc. Family relationships are under more constant pressure than ever before. Moral choices have become convoluted. Fulfilling the need for love, for recognition, for the feeling that our lives

matter in this huge impersonal world, have all dwindled in recent decades. Loneliness is on the loose.

Some stress is caused by the events in the world around us: accidents, war, illness, terrorist attacks, tornados, death of a loved one, economic fluctuation, and circumstances beyond our control.

Other stress is caused by our own doing: choices we make. Pogo said it “We have met the enemy and he is us.” To ignore warnings of health, economic disaster, family breakups, etc. is foolish, and there is no one to blame in these cases except yourself.

Then of course there is stress caused by others. Sometimes family and marital problems are only one person’s fault. Usually not. Sometimes the teacher or the boss is unfair, for whatever reason. Sometimes a drunk driver causes havoc for an uncountable number of people. How about you? Do you understand the sources of stress in your life?

I want you to join me in a little experiment, which we did here five years ago. It is sort of a “show and tell sermon.” Take your bulletin or a little pencil or a pew card...anything you can get hold of. Place it between your thumb and middle finger and hold it tightly. (Now don’t feel foolish, you can’t get this kind of thing in most churches.) Hold it out in front of you, and squeeze it, hard...as if your life depended on not letting it drop. O.K.! Now squeeze it harder. Don’t hurt yourself...but harder, as hard as you can. You will find that it gets uncomfortable. I feel a little heat between my fingers. Keep pressing it, as long as you can. O.K.? Now ... let go of it! Let it fall to the floor. What a relief! The experiment is over. Covet the release when you let it go! That peace and relaxation you feel in your fingers is a sign and symbol of what your soul and psyche feel when the stressful experiences of your life are released.

So, to move along, as a Christian, how do you manage stress when it comes? Let me share a few possibilities, briefly:

I. First, you can ignore it. Run away from it, bury it. Just tell people you’re fine when you know or suspect you aren’t. Keep trying to fool everybody, including yourself. After all, you can handle it. That is the way many people handle it. “I’m O.K.; you’re O.K.!”

You can bury the whole issue, just ignore and forget it: all the hostility, anxiety, guilt, whatever. Whatever the warnings, you can keep on keeping on inside your soul and go on as if nothing ever happened. But the problem, as one psychologist

wrote, is that when you fail to deal with the stress and try to bury your emotions, you bury them alive, and they can resurrect themselves whenever and wherever they chose.

Ignoring stress does not solve problems, anymore than ignoring a pain or other physical signs the body gives you will make them go away. Early detection of the worst diseases is the key to the cure. The same is true with stress. Your body, soul and psyche will get even with you. They do not forget what you did and do to them.

Some years ago at the University of Washington, Professor Thomas J. Holmes studied hundreds and thousand of people who were tip toeing through what he called “the hidden land mines of life.” Spouses and children died, an unexpected divorce, a victim of rape, a family fight, a move from one part of the country to another, a fire, a break-in at home, etc. etc.

Holmes then quantified and rated the relative stress of these and countless other events on a scale of 1 to 100, 100 being the top. His study came up with the following results: divorce rated 74 points; being arrested or accused 63; being fired 47; going on trial 72; plus 39 occurrences; a parking ticket was 13; the death of a spouse or child a full 100 points. Various illnesses rated from 10 to 95.

He called these measurements “life change units” and as he continued his study he found that if a person went over them limit, it was almost certain that an illness would follow. The same as if you ignore your car. Before long the stress will cause you greater grief and more money and could ruin your engine. They do stress tests on air planes every three months to make sure the plane will be able to fly. Ignore your house, especially an old house, and before long you will have insurmountable problems. It does no good to ignore your stress.

II. The second way to manage stress is to face up to it. You must take hold of your stress before it takes hold of you. The best defense is still a good offense. Distinguish between the things you can change and the things you cannot change. That is part of The Serenity Prayer. If you can change it, change it. We ask for trouble when we refuse to change the things we can or could change. Like, when we hold on to old grudges. We break our promises. We harbor hopes untold. We let habits control us. We let anger go unchecked. Sometimes we need professional help to learn to let go of these things. But save the clinical disturbances deep in the psyche, each of us has the power to change our behavior. Christ promises it!

There is very little you and I can do e.g., about the illness or the death of a loved one. That brings enormous stress, but it comes with the territory of love. If you do not care about anybody, you will never have to worry. If you do not give yourself, it will not hurt when they are taken away. Caring is the price you pay for love. If you had not cared, it would not hurt.

This means taking hold of yourself, going off alone to talk to you and to the Lord. The Bible often refers to a wilderness experience. Moses went to the mountaintop. So did Elijah. So did John The Baptist. So did St. Paul. After his conversation on the road to Damascus, he went off to the desert to try to interpret it. Jesus often sought to be alone.

If you do not anchor your life deep inside of you, you will blow about in whatever wind comes by. “To Thine Own Self Be True...” If you live your life responding to the wind, rather than determining what you need and want for you, you will be forever searching, and forever confused. You will blame “them,” or blame bad luck, blame anyone or anything...when you will be the problem.

III. The third way to manage stress, and the most satisfying, is to turn it over to the Lord. You knew I would eventually come to that. Christ has promised to bear our burdens. “Come unto me all you who are weak and heavy laden. Take my yoke upon you and I will give you rest.” That’s the number one message of the Gospel: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.”

Second Timothy 3:1, the words of our text, hammer it down for good: “But understand this, that there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, etc. Swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying its power. Avoid these people.” Notice what he placed first! Not lovers of money, or pleasure, or this world, but “lovers of self.” That’s where it all begins. And that’s where it ends. In your own heart.

In Stress, What It Can Do To Your Health, the authors (Walter McQuade and Ann Aikman) write (on page 200): “A smoldering hope pervades human life. We set up objectives for this hope: money, knowledge, love, recognition, virtue. But what we are really yearning for is something larger; the feeling that we matter; that we make a difference. We must say something with our lives, and what we say must be heard.”

Without Christ we are powerless in the things which really matter most. With Him, all things are possible. Without Him, none of them are. Jesus prayed all the time to bring His life into compliance with the Lord, rather than to bring the Lord down on His side. “Dear God, not My will, but Thine be done.”

Surrender your life and all of its troubles. Say something like, “Lord, I cannot handle this by myself. Pick me up in your arms and carry me across this valley, and

take me safely to the other side. Add your power to mine, so we can do it together. Help me to know the difference between what I can do and what I cannot do, and seeing...to do it. Help me change myself to be more like Jesus.” Cast all your burdens upon him, for he careth for you. He does, for now and forevermore. Amen.

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