

THEOLOGY | CRITIQUE | REVIEW | ESSAY | CULTURE

salt&light

1st Quarter 2012

I MUST BE THE GREATEST

BEN WALLER

PLUS:
THE SINGLE STIGMA
WONDERS NEVER CEASE
GENDER, THE CULTURE AND THE CHURCH
COMPREHENSIVE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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FROM THE EDITOR

This is the Spring issue, the first issue of 2012, and I am reminded of Solomon's description of Spring: *for behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land.* In this unseasonably warm weather during which I write this, it truly does seem that winter is gone and the Church and God's people look toward the Resurrection which made all things new. So relax, enjoy the sun on your face, and be entertained, informed and stimulated by your very talented brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our lead article is by Ben Waller, an RUF intern at the University. Ben writes of one of the iconic figures of our time, Muhammad Ali, and his quest to be the "greatest." Ben looks at this from a Gospel viewpoint and reflects on men who insist on placing themselves first, even ahead of God.

Prathima Ryali-Hancock, in *The Single Stigma*, meditates on Christians in the 49% of Americans who are unmarried and on the concerns, disappointments and satisfactions of being unmarried and in Christ. You will find her observations honest, perceptive, incisive and helpful to all, married and unmarried.

In *Wonders Never Cease*, Peggy Drinkard, writes about discovering her sanctification at work after a response to a hurtful interaction. It is a brief and beautiful meditation that will give us all something to consider in our daily lives as God's people.

Tim Lien is teaching logic at the classical school and in *The Necessity and Limits of Reason*, he ruminates on the uses of logic to seek truth. In doing so, he outlines the ways logic fails as well as succeeds and on the necessity to have a basis of truth as a starting point. You will find his article interesting and inspiring.

In *Gender, the Culture and the Church*, Clay Staggs considers the brokenness of male-female relationships in our culture and also in our churches. In examining this, he speaks to the effort our church is making to repair and sustain these relationships.

Bob Thornton's article, *Reflections on the Man in the Mirror*, is his look at a particular man, himself, at a particular time, now, and what he sees, both past and future. It is a beautiful look at sanctification and a man's relationship with his Savior.

In *Comprehensive Christian Education*, Kimberly Staggs considers her youth outside the Church and her efforts after she became a Christian to educate her children in a way that allowed them to understand the truth of God. This led to the founding of our Classical School and the article is an important statement about Classical Christian education.

Eric Venable writes about that most important relationship for Christians between the Law of God and the Gospel. The article is perceptive, profound and important for Christians.

Our Finale piece is a meditation on the nature of love, based on a very moving poem by the African-American poet, Robert Hayden. You won't soon forget it.

I MUST BE THE GREATEST

Seeking Identity Apart from God

by Ben Waller

Many will remember Muhammad Ali as the greatest fighter of all time. Many will remember his fighting spirit, his remarkable determination, and his refusal to stay down, both inside and outside the ring. Others will remember his arrogance, his degrading comments toward other fighters, his controversial statements. His life was an interesting life, and in many ways, a life that was a constant fight. But just what was he fighting for?

There are many possible answers to that question. I would like to take a deeper look at one of sport's history's favorite heroes. Ali was just as well known for his antics outside the ring, and I believe his words and actions can really give us a clue about his heart. As we venture to look at Ali's heart, it is very possible that we will learn some things about our own.

After Cassius Clay (as he was named at birth) won his first heavyweight title, he met with reporters the next day. One reporter asked him, "Are you a card-carrying member of the Black Muslims?" Clay answered him, "Card-carrying—what does that mean?...I know where I'm going, and I know the truth, and I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be what I want to be." Though that seems to be an inspiring statement on the surface, that kind of thinking can actually be devastating. Let me explain what I mean.

A pastor in New York City named Tim Keller has done a sermon series on objections to the Christian

faith. In one of his sermons, he addresses the problem that many people in our culture have with the idea of a loving God sending people to hell. Keller reasons that most people don't understand the nature of hell or what happens to each of us in our lives, apart from the intervention of God's grace, that naturally lead us there. Keller cites Søren Kierkegaard, who, when searching for a definition of sin that was broader than simply saying "breaking God's law", said that sin is "building your identity on anything other than God." Kierkegaard reached this conclusion based on Jesus' interactions in the New Testament with the Pharisees, religious officers who obeyed God's law in what they thought was a faultless way. However, it was these men that Jesus called "a brood of vipers," and it was these men who rejected the Son of God to the point where they crucified Him.

You see, the Pharisees' identities were built on themselves and their ability to obey, and therefore, in their minds, they had no need for God. This is what sin has always been; we have rejected God and chosen to be what we want be, apart from Him. The biblical word for this is "idolatry"—to find our identity, our meaning, and our purpose in something other than God. This is the gradual slope to hell. In the ultimate punishment, God

actually gives us over to what we want; we want to be on our own, apart from Him, and whether we choose to do this by keeping all His rules and ignoring Him or by breaking all His rules and ignoring Him, the

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result is the same. And so, in His judgment, He lets us do just that. He lets us build our identities on things other than Himself, and the result is that we take ourselves further and further from His kingdom, the whole time having it our way, thinking that we are free. This inevitably leads to Hell, a place where God will no longer bother us. Keller says, "Hell is a freely chosen identity apart from God, going on forever." We have it just the way we want it. Hell is not full of people screaming to get out while God cruelly keeps them in; rather, it is full of people who would rather have anything else than God, and that is exactly what they get. They weren't thrown in there against their will; no, they were left in there in accordance with their will. As C.S. Lewis once said, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done', and those to whom God says, 'Thy will be done'."

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So what does this have to do with Muhammad Ali? There is a fascinating article by Mikal Gilmore on Ali in the November 2011 issue of *Men's Journal*. The conclusions I draw in my article are all based upon what I read in Gilmore's article. As we read about Ali's life and career, I think what we will see is a man who fought not only in the ring against his fellow man, but also in his heart against His Creator. He fought not only to be the greatest, but also to "be what he wanted to be," which sadly, had nothing to do with God. While Martin Luther King Jr. sought justice for those mistreated and oppressed in this country through Christian values and principles, Ali sought justice for himself through whatever means necessary. It may look like Ali fought for those same oppressed people in a different way (He made claims as such, saying "I'm not fighting for me, I'm fighting for the black people who have no future"), but his actions speak otherwise. I believe he really was fighting for himself and for the right to say "I

will be who I want to be and no one will tell me otherwise, man or God."

How can I say this? How can I make these claims about Ali? Follow me here in a journey through Muhammad's career. We will begin with an

exchange between Ali and Joe Frazier from the *Men's Journal* article. It is from here on that Ali's true heart begins to show:

In The Greatest, Ali tells of a good-natured car ride the two men shared from Philadelphia to New York in the late 1960's. They talked about their inevitable appointment in a boxing ring. "After I whip your ass," Frazier told Ali, "I'll buy you some ice cream." Ali was dumbfounded that anybody imagined beating him...After that

car ride, said Ali, "we never looked eye to eye."

What sounds to me like some good natured trash talking from Frazier really bothered Ali. In fact, he was "dumbfounded that anybody imagined beating him." Why? Because in his mind, he was the greatest, and that was his identity; anybody who stood as a threat to that identity could no longer be a friend. To not be the greatest would shake Ali to the core. This is only true if that is how you define yourself. Ali then said of Frazier before the fight: "He's the wrong kind of Negro. He's not like me, 'cause he's the Uncle Tom...He works for the enemy." This statement and Ali's attitude toward Frazier alienated him, causing a huge rift to what could potentially be two black men who were friends and fighting for the same justice. No, in Ali's heart there was only room for himself. He was champion and he alone. That was the way it had to be.

In his first fight with Joe Frazier, tagged "The Fight of the Century," a fight that lasted the full 15 rounds,

Frazier knocked Ali to the ground in the last round, securing the victory. Although Ali popped right back up, the judges unanimously voted Frazier the winner. He had retained his title. This disparaged Muhammad Ali. He began working his way back to the title ring to face Frazier again, and Ali tells us that it was “because he beat me.” Ali could not rest until he had defeated Frazier and secured his title as heavyweight champion again. And so, in 1974, he fought Frazier again, and this time he won by unanimous decision. But at this point Frazier wasn't the heavyweight champion; he had lost to the young, hard-hitting George Foreman. Ali had more work to do to get his identity back.

Thus, the “Rumble in the Jungle” was born. In this fight, Ali took the rope-a-dope strategy, exhausting Foreman, and then knocked him out in the 8th round. He was once again world champion. After this, Ali defended his title 3 times, and in 1975 announced his retirement. He had everything he ever wanted, so there was nothing left to do, right? But then a reporter asked him “What about Joe Frazier?” and Ali suddenly changed his mind, saying “Joe Frazier! I want him bad.” Why? Why do you think Ali would do this? I believe that the question must have jarred some doubt in his mind that everyone really knew he was the greatest, and that he would have to beat his toughest opponent, one whom he had a 1-1 record with, one more time, to prove that he really was. He had to. His whole identity rested on it.

Mikal Gilmore knew it too; he said, “These were combatants at the **peak of their purposes**, battling not simply for the right to a title but also **for historic dominance**.” (emphasis mine)

So the two great fighters met yet again, this fight dubbed the “Thrilla in Manila.” A vicious battle

ensued. After the 14th round, Frazier's trainer tossed in the towel, giving Ali the victory. He did it. And as we finally get to end of Muhammad's career, we see more and more that he had built his identity on being the greatest. Listen to how Gilmore wraps up Ali's career:

Since then, it's been aftermath—some of it legendary, some heartbreaking. Ali fought 10 more fights after Manila. In February 1978 he lost his title to Leon Spinks, a novice professional. Ali was in torment—the night after the fight, he was running down the street at 2 AM, yelling, “Gotta get my title back! Gotta get my title back!”

I firmly believe the reason that Muhammad Ali had to get his title back was because without it, he didn't know who he was. It's interesting that the article

describes Ali as being “in torment” isn't it? That's how the Bible describes people as being in hell.

Let's take a brief break from the story of Muhammad Ali to examine a story in scripture of a man who made an idol of himself. In the book of 1 Samuel, there was a king named Saul. He was the first king of Israel, and the Bible describes him as “a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.” He was a great warrior, and the Lord gave him success in all his battles. But in chapter 13,

we are given a glimpse of Saul's heart. Saul is supposed to wait for the prophet Samuel to arrive at their meeting place to perform a sacrifice, but when Samuel was late, Saul unlawfully performed the sacrifice himself. He disobeyed God to get what he wanted. Therefore the Lord promised that He would raise up another king and would continue the

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kingship in his line instead of Saul's. Saul continued as king and God continued to give success to Israel, but in chapter 15, Saul makes a fatal mistake. He again disobeys the Lord in order to get what he wants, and this time tries to cover it up with a sacrifice. The prophet Samuel comes to him in great distress afterwards and gives him these chilling words:

*"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than to sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and **presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.** Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king." (1 Samuel 15: 22-23, emphasis mine)*

Saul gives a half-hearted apology, but in doing so reveals what he is really living for:

*"I have sinned; **yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel,** and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord your God." (1 Samuel 15:30, emphasis mine)*

What he is really after is the honor of the people for himself. As his life goes on, this is further revealed. When the new king is anointed, Israel goes to battle with the Philistines, and David, anointed to be the new king, kills their enemy's champion, Goliath. The women of Israel begin to sing after the battle: "Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands." The Scripture tells us that "Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him." He couldn't rejoice in the victory for his nation and for his people. Why? Because in his heart, it was all about him; there was only room for one king, and for another to have it would shake him to his core

because that was his identity. Sound familiar?

The rest of Saul's life is one sad story after another. He tries to kill David and even his own son for being friends with David. His life is spent in torment and unrest, eventually ending in suicide, because his identity was never in the Lord, the true King.

Well, what about the rest of Muhammad Ali's life? Gilmore says:

A terrible irony had invaded Muhammad Ali's being: He had prided himself, throughout all his years of boxing, on avoiding head blows and facial scars. He instead had allowed fighters to pummel his midsection, his sides and arms, in defiance of the boxing dictum that if you "kill the body, the head will

follow." Yet it was likely those body blows...that helped ruin his nervous system. Ali had absorbed his fears into a physical place where he could withstand them and make them work for him. All along, they were also working against him.


"A terrible irony." He did everything he ever wanted, but in the end, it led to physical pain. Ah, but did it win him emotional and spiritual satisfaction? To quote again,

In January 2012, Muhammad Ali turns 70. He has had a long time—nearly half his life—to weigh his past boasts against unknown eternity. "I conquered the world," he has said, "and it didn't bring me true happiness...Every day is a judgment for me."

A sad ending to what many would call a remarkable life. I feel quite a bit of compassion for Muhammad Ali. Is there hope for him yet?

"I conquered the world and it didn't bring me true happiness...every day is a judgment for me."

The Bible gives us another story about another Saul, and this one ends quite differently than sad King Saul. This Saul was a Pharisee; as mentioned above, one who built his identity on his ability to follow the rules apart from God. But Jesus graciously intervened in his life. On his way to kill Christians, the Lord appeared to Saul and struck his eyes blind so that his heart could see what he really needed. He was given a new identity, marked by a new name: Paul, the apostle of God. A man set free; free to be whom God called him to be, not who he wanted to be apart from God. A man free to face any persecution, any loss, any trial, any failure, because his identity was not wrapped up in those things but was grounded in his Savior, which really did bring him true happiness, and true freedom.

Cassius Clay changed his name as young man to give himself a new identity, an identity that was wrapped up in his ability to be champion. He needed that heavyweight title. It was an idol, something he looked to for purpose, identity, meaning and significance, and if he didn't have it, he didn't know who he was. It was an idol that he gave everything for, but in the end, it gave nothing back except physical pain, the lack of happiness, and judgment each day. Cassius Clay's new name, Muhammad Ali, the name he staked everything on, means "beloved of God." My prayer for Muhammad Ali is that he would live up to the true meaning of that name. I pray that he, and I, and you, would find our rest, identity, purpose, meaning, significance, forgiveness, and peace through Jesus Christ, the true King and the true Champion, in whom all who build their identity will truly become "beloved of God." 

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INTERACT WITH CULTURE

RIVERWOOD BOOK TABLE

The Riverwood Book Table is located in the church narthex. Here the church provides books of interest to our members. These volumes include a wide range of subjects such as theology, biography, history, fiction and commentary. While many of these books are not classic "Presbyterian" texts, they have been found to be informative, helpful and are often classics. We believe that you and other Riverwood members will benefit from this cultural interaction.

RIVERWOOD MOVIE NIGHTS

Movies are important purveyors of ideas and culture and are a part of the 21st Century canon. At irregular intervals, Riverwood will have a Movie Night on Sunday evenings. We will screen a movie that is of interest to the Christian community and provide an opportunity to discuss it. Join us for profitable Christian interaction with the questions and ideas provided by movies.

*The Tree
of Life*

Get Low

THE SINGLE STIGMA

Unbound in Marriage, Bound in the Covenant

by Prathima Ryali-Hancock

I've been a single adult for ten years. I've been a Christian for every one of those ten years. Prior to that, I was married for nine years and I spent seven of those nine years as an agnostic. My journey as a Christian has been the most prevalent part of my time as a single adult, and it has been a precious time that has drawn me, over and over again, to the truth of the gospel – that Jesus' death and resurrection is the only redemption that matters, regardless of the fact that I consciously and unconsciously keep trying to believe that I have something to do with it. As a single, sometimes I wonder, is this what the Christian life is all about?

The Single Christian Life

In a recent sermon, Tim Lien mentioned that 51% of Americans are married; this is a record low. For reasons too numerous to delve into, the number of married believers in America has declined and continues to decline. Yet, he also mentioned this: “Marriage is a picture of something far bigger and greater than itself. Christian marriage is a picture for the treasures of heaven...if marriage is a picture for something greater, then you have to know the greater picture.”

I found myself thinking, do I know and understand that picture as a single adult? My thoughts unconsciously wandered to the idea that I may not be experiencing the most ideal way of experiencing this great unity with God. I felt left out. I am not part of that club. Yet, this is one of the biggest fallacies that singles sometimes believe.

The covenant that God establishes with all of His

elect through the saving grace of Jesus is not dependent on marital status, age, race, or football allegiances. Yes, the relationship between Christ and the church is reflected in the picture that man and wife represent in marriage. How can singles see this same picture? The picture for singles, I believe, is the same one woven throughout the Bible: in the beginning of Genesis with the Fall, throughout the wanderings of the Israelites in Exodus, in the Psalms of David, in the prayers of John, in the worship of Mary and Martha, and in the testimonies of all of the disciples. Our calling is one of utter and complete dependence on God, with the Lord Jesus Christ as our mediator. In I Corinthians 7:17, Paul says, “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.” There are times when it feels like an impossibly high calling to be single: to be only dependent on Him, to cling to the idea that Christ is serving us, every moment of every day, and believing that He will complete the work He started in us and keep us blameless in the sight of God. This picture is the one that singles have through Him – it's a paradigm of understanding our great need for Him but also accepting that He loves us unconditionally despite ourselves. We may not see the yin and yang of the picture through marriage, but we do see it in different ways through our day-to-day existence.

This is no theory. This is my life. I have only been able to live and grow in this Christian life because by His grace, I have a church that is providing the backbone needed to care for me, teach me, and worship with me. Practically speaking, I believe the

There are times when it feels like a high calling to be single

Believe it or not, married people need to fellowship with singles, too

gospel moves in the Lord's kingdom primarily because of the church. It is through our believing families. It is through the layers of our own natures being peeled back as God sanctifies us based on where we are in our lives. It's important that we, as singles, stay involved in our church to build relationships that are bound by the sole reason that we are all inheritors of the kingdom of God.

Discouragement as a single

I will admit that I have been discouraged occasionally with being a Christian single. Not because of anything overt, but because there are times I feel out of place as a single person in our covenant community. Families are used to strengthen His community. As a single mother, I have often felt the weight of this job on my shoulders, forgetting that it's really God's work that He does through me. There are disturbing thoughts I have as a single, sometimes. *You're not good enough, you're not good enough, you're not good enough, and that's why you're single.* Then there are thoughts that I know can only be from the Holy Spirit. *You're not good enough, and that's why I am chasing you; you're not good enough, and that's why I have redeemed you; you're not good enough in and of yourself, but as my adopted daughter through Christ, you're covered in His grace.* I am firmly convinced that the second group of thoughts can only be confirmed, deepened, and strengthened by being an active member of a gospel-centered church where the message of redemption is offered and embraced. I may forget this during my week when I'm bogged down with to-do lists and worries, but it's often brought home to me through worship on Sunday morning and through fellowship and prayer with my covenant church family.

I've come to the realization that I really, really, really

don't want to be dependent on anyone. I don't want to admit my failings. I don't want to admit I need some help getting that item off the top shelf. I don't want to admit I can't be a good parent to my girls by myself. This pride is exhausting. There's a weight and a solitude that comes with it. When I come home from work after a day of constant meetings or frustration, I don't have someone to vent with. When my children give me the silent treatment or are openly defiant, I don't have someone to balance the bad cop routine. When my car breaks down, when my disposal stops working, when my roof is covered with tree limbs, there's no partner to ask for help. Instead, there's one primary place to run. I am learning to lean on Him for my daily needs. I'm learning to trust Him that my frustrations and my lack of ability all are in His control and part of His plan. I'm learning to be grateful for what He's teaching me as an unmarried believer.

If you're single, it's easy to question if we are where we are supposed to be, if we're doing what we need to do, or if it's just a transition stage before life really begins. We even live that way sometimes, as if this singlehood is just practice for a later time that will really show who we are as Christians. This is a dangerous pattern of thinking. We are not less-than-Christian because we are single. We are recipients and redeemers of the gospel in our single lives just as much as we would be if we were married.

Antidotes to Discouragement

In 1 Corinthians 7:25-35, Paul says, "Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But

if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”

Paul's words here are meant to show the blessings of being single. But, even more than that, they also point us to the higher calling. We can be “anxious of the things of the Lord” without being preoccupied with the anxieties that come from marriage. This devotion to the Lord represents a single person's “real marriage” as Tim Keller calls it in his recent work, *The Meaning of Marriage*. This marriage to Christ can actually keep us from making an idol of marriage that might distort a single life and, eventually, a possible married life. They also point us to something greater that we already have. We are blessed beyond belief and we are right where God wants us to be.

We should also consider stepping out of our comfort zone. Single adults, as part of the church body, must learn from and provide support to people regardless of marital status, age, and even personality – this is the vow that all of us (single and married) took when we joined the church. We should try to take advantage of opportunities when thinking about

church activities and how we can fellowship with others. Believe it or not, married people need to fellowship with singles – not to be workhorses, but to share thoughts and experiences without painting an unrealistic picture of a carefree life. Singles need married people in their lives, too. If we want to be married, we can learn from those that are by having real and honest conversations about married lives. I've heard many wise people say that it's important for us to pray about the kind of spouse we want to be, rather than praying for the spouse we want. This is very good advice, but hard to put in practice without discipline and training. My prayers (when I consider not being single) run something like, “Lord, please soften my heart and help me be open to anyone that might be out there that I would be able to serve with your guidance. Really, it could be any Christian that might be even plus or minus five years of my age, with a job and hopefully a decent sense of humor, not too attached to his mother...” A prayer about my own heart turns into that list-like prayer of qualities that I'm looking for. How twisted is that? An indication of how I want to get my own way. Yet, sharing these thoughts with my covenant family seems right, true, and humbling.

The picture of the gospel that I see before me is the same picture that is present for every believer of the gospel. We may have different applications of it in our lives, but God in his infinite mercy provides us those experiences, meeting our needs in ways that are entirely unexpected. Regardless of marital status, He meets us, strengthens us, sanctifies us, and loves us. This goodness, when I realize it, is the only truth that I can rest my trust in. And, for that, I'm grateful. ¶

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Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may
contact her at pryalib@gmail.com.*

WONDERS NEVER CEASE

The Work of Sanctification

by Peggy Drinkard

Something surprising happened the other day that encouraged and heartened me. I was pummeled by some stinging, mean-spirited words, and my initial feelings were what they have always been: anger, defensiveness, sadness and shame. I might have given full vent to any or all of them, but miracle of miracles, the question popped into my mind, “wait....what does the Bible say about this?” (Yes, Virginia, there really IS sanctification!)

I didn't have to search much to begin my mental discourse. Our pastor preached that very day on Matthew 5:38-42 (going the extra mile, turning the other cheek). He explained why, as redeemed children of God, we don't have “rights” as the world understands them, and how we can safely leave the exacting of justice to our Heavenly Father.

As if that weren't enough, my devotions that day focused on Ezekiel 14:23, “Ye shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done, saith the Lord.” Anthony Thorold commented, “...the burdens we have to bear may not only be other than what we should have selected for ourselves, but may even seem inconsistent with that formation and discipline of character which we honestly want to promote. Knowing us better than we know ourselves, fully understanding how greatly we are affected by the outward events and conditions of life, he has ordered them with a view to our entire and final, not

only our immediate, happiness.” (Wow! There is also Providence, Virginia!)

So I sat down and started thinking about (as opposed to reacting to) my hurtful encounter. With pen and journal in hand, I started to preach the Gospel to myself. It ran like this:

“When you are critiqued, or hurtfully criticized, listen for the grain of truth, however unjust you feel the rebuke to be. It is hard to see ourselves accurately, and observations from outside of us can be useful, if painful. Once you detect the provoking truth kernel/fault, confess it and seek, in future, to amend it. After confession and repentance, don't allow yourself to fall into a morbid funk of introspection. Move on. Christ's death secured forgiveness for every one of my sins; the grossest, most intentional and glaring ones and the hidden flaws I don't even perceive. Sin means missing the mark...not only outright rebellion. Christ redeems me so that, first, I can be forgiven and made right with my righteous judge, but, through His resurrection, he has also started rolling a process of restoration. He has secured for me, no matter how

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ponderously slow the transformation seems, complete healing. One day every single little crack and blemish will be eradicated, and I will be like Him, and there will be no cause for shame. In the meantime, ‘walk humbly with your God,’ and likewise, with your fellow men.

**Christ's death secured
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even perceive**

Whatever criticisms, appropriate or not, come my way, can be sanctified. Everything that comes to me is filtered through God's love and can only do me good. It is all a gift. P.S., remember to forgive the fellow sinner who is the bearer of painful gifts."

Since I have been an adult Christian for more than thirty years, you might think I should be further down the sanctification road than this. No doubt that is true. But I am thankful there is evidence I am ON the road, or, more accurately, that I have been PUT on the road by another, who is perfect in every way, and who is loving and faithful and who KEEPS me on the road. That is the only hope I have of completing the journey. I tend to steer toward the ditches.

By another act of kind Providence, we sang "Great is Thy Faithfulness" that same day during the worship service. Then we received communion; testimony of what has been done about my sin, followed by the gracious benediction blessing, enabling me to say with Paul (II Timothy 1:12), "I know whom I have believed in, and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I've committed unto Him against that day." ¶

Peggy Drinkard is the Director of Children's Ministry at Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may contact her at pdrinkard@riverwoodchurch.org.

INTERACT WITH CULTURE

SHAKESPEARE

A Midsummer Night's Dream



RIVERWOOD BOOK GROUP

This group meets each Monday evening at 7:00 pm in the Church library to discuss books we have chosen to read. We cover a wide range of theology, fiction, history and commentary, looking at all subjects through the lens of the Gospel and "sharpening each other" in our interaction. If you enjoy books, Christian fellowship and good coffee, please join us. All are invited. Upcoming selections include *A Midsummer's Night Dream* by William Shakespeare and *The American Religion* by Harold Bloom.

THE NECESSITY AND LIMITS OF REASON

Making the Trip to Truth

by Tim Lien

I am teaching a logic class. You might be tempted to think that Logic makes a person into some sort of analytical or debate wizard. Not really. What I have found is that it organizes ideas in a way that produces clarity for everybody—yourself and for your opponent. You can at least be intelligible or even understand an opposing opinion without getting lost in talking past one another.

Currently, we are studying formal logic: the practice of translating all your statements, thoughts, and words into simple forms. Once accomplished, you can determine if an argument is logically valid. That is, does the conclusion *necessarily* flow from the premises that you are standing upon?

There have been two interesting results.

The first is that it distills any assertion into a comprehensible bite. The second is that allows you to separate the *truth* of a premise from its *logical* argument. Both are important for the pursuit of truth, but there are many arguments that are soundly logical with false premises. A person can be quite reasonable and still be quite wrong.

Example:

(A)

All elephants are grey animals.

Some grey animals have excellent memories.

Therefore, all elephants are animals with excellent memories.

(B)

All grey animals are elephants.

All animals with excellent memories are grey animals.

Therefore, all elephants are animals with excellent memories.

Example A has true statements, but it uses invalid logical reasoning. Example B has untrue statements, but it is very reasonable and logically valid. Logic won't always lead you to truth, but it sure does a good job of weeding out wimpy thinking.

And the weeding is no small task.

Aristotle was the first known logic nerd to organize a catalog of logical arguments. Centuries of tweaking, quibbling, and refining netted 256 possible logical arguments. Out of those 256 possible logical arguments, only 24 reflect valid reasoning. That means that roughly 11% of all arguments are reasonable.

Dorothy Sayers (friend of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien) drily commented, “Indeed, the practical utility of Formal Logic today lies not so much in the establishment of positive conclusions as in the prompt detection and exposure of invalid inference.”

This is a great reminder for the Christian. The study

It must be recognized that the far-reaching effects of the Fall have infiltrated our brains and the brains of everyone around us in a monumental way

Your premises need to be sound. An ever-existing, self-sustaining, non-created God just might be a very good place to start

of reason/logic will not necessarily lead you to truth, but it will enable you to smoke out the rampant forms of bad thinking. Logic enables a person to throw out all the peanuts from the can of mixed nuts. Or, perhaps, better: it enables one to throw out all the mixed nuts, leaving the peanuts. Either way, you catch my drift. It must be recognized that the far-reaching effects of the Fall have infiltrated our brains and the brains of everyone around us in a monumental way. Sorting out logical nonsense is a constant task, because 89% of reasons are just plain logical hooey.

Christians are often guilty of a very different kind of blunder. They handily can give out truth statements, but often fail to put them into proper logical forms. Their premises may be true. Their conclusions may also be true, but they are often packaged in invalid reasoning. In other words, the statements may be true, but they fail to show proper connection to each other. When people accuse Christians of being illogical, we too often ignore that the accuser might actually be correct.

Which brings us to another great reminder: once you find solid reason, the *truth* of an argument is still very much up for grabs. Logic cannot deliver you all the way to truth. It can pack your bags with 24 valid logical arguments and make sure your travel shampoo is less than 3 ounces. It can drop you off at the airport and lovingly wish your trip goes well. But truth is still in Minneapolis waiting in the cell-phone lot. Logic is important, but it can't make the trip to truth.

To use a logical expression, “your conclusions will only be as good as your premises.” In other words, our actions and conclusions lean heavily on our assumptions of what is true or false. Where do we find truth? Where do we learn truth? Where is a

standard of truth? Where can you find claims that are not just reasonable, but *true*? What standard assesses all other truth claims? If being reasonable is very different from being truthful, then where O, where art Thou, truth? The study of first things is not some philosophical parlor-trick. First things matter. Your premises need to be sound. An ever-existing, self-sustaining, non-created God just might be a very good place to start. Our God is Truth and reveals himself in truth—His Word, world, and Son.

Solomon seemed to know that the study of thinking (reason/logic) had its limits. He wanted wisdom—truth applied rightly. He viewed wisdom and truth as a great treasure—first, because they are supremely good, and secondly because they are fantastically rare. Having one of the 24 logical arguments in your holster doesn't mean much if it ain't loaded with truth. Having truth that is also in good reasonable form means that you won't be caught without ammo when Eddy McGready's gang corners you in the corrals on the edge of town.

And this is what I am getting to: the study of thinking, reason, and logic apart from truth will make you an excellent defense lawyer, but it won't make the world any clearer. In the same way, simply repeating truths will make you a good Trivial Pursuit player, but it will never develop your mind to see the good and necessary connections between *all* of God's truth. Studying logic under the umbrella of God's truth gives us the rare ability to see truth in its ever-intricate and thorough connectedness to God himself and every truth found in his creation. ¶

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GENDER, THE CULTURE AND THE CHURCH

Seeking to Restore Biblical Order



by Clay Staggs

Gloria Steinem once said, “A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.” And, at the other end of the spectrum, here's Hugh Hefner: “Playboy isn't like the downscale, male bonding, beer-swilling phenomena that is being promoted now by (some men's magazines). My whole notion was the romantic connection between male and female.”

Well. Isn't that just a perfect capsule summary of the wildly diverging opinions on the relationships between men and women that the world offers? On the one hand, hard-core feminists might say that men and women simply have nothing to offer each other. On the other hand, Hefner definitely thinks that women can offer men something. But, I don't know that I'd call what shows up on the pages of Playboy a “romantic connection between male and female.”

So what about the average man or woman sitting in the pews of the average church in America? Does the woman sometime secretly think that she could do everything much better and more easily if her husband, who acts like one of the kids, would just get out of her way? And what about the guy? Does he secretly long for his wife to quit nagging him and do more of the stuff that the chicks in the porn videos do? Is that his vision of a romantic connection?

And what about the church? Do either our hypothetical male or female in the pew think that the church gets it? Do they

think that what the Bible says about men and women is outdated? Dumb? Sexist? Unsuitable to modern life? Out of touch with contemporary “gender norms”? Or, perhaps they think that the church doesn't even care about the issue – or is just afraid to address it honestly.

I fear that all of these attitudes are far, far more common than any of us might like to admit. No matter a person's perspective, it is indisputable that the state of relations between the sexes is bad, and appears to be getting worse. But why? The feminists, who really came into their own with Steinem's generation, have been on the stage for some time now. Steinem is 77 years old. Hefner, too, is still out there living the Playboy lifestyle at age 85. However, the promises of “liberation” that they offered don't really seem to have panned out, do they? One could indeed construct an argument that they've made matters worse.

Statistics are all too revealing. The number of people in America who are married has dropped to just over

half of the population. Though it's recently fallen slightly, still close to one of every two first marriages ends in divorce. The number of children being raised in homes where no father is present has skyrocketed. Moreover, all you need to do is briefly surf the web to see how hardened many men and women have become to the opposite sex and the entire concept of marriage.

It is indisputable that the state of relations between the sexes is bad, and appears to be getting worse

So, all of that's really depressing. What's to be done? Sit back and wait for "Sex and the City" to become the norm of American life? Well, not so fast. That may happen to the culture outside the church, but it needn't happen inside the church—provided that we inside the church are willing to return to Biblical teachings about the differences between the sexes.

And let's start with that, shall we? Contrary to what some in our postmodern society have attempted to teach, there are real differences between the sexes. It isn't just some social construct. In fact, men and women were specifically created to be different.

Living in the fallen world in which we find ourselves, we might immediately think that these differences are just so great that understanding (much less living together) is just impossible. And although the fall definitely twisted the relationship between men and women (along with the rest of creation), it still retains the image of God. Indeed, when the created order is properly understood and sought after, the differences can become things of joy and wonder instead of instruments of frustration.


So what is that created order that needs restoration? How does this apply to marriage? To the unmarried? To families? To dating? To the church? And, finally, to institutions outside the church? These are questions too weighty and detailed for the limited space of this magazine. In fact, Riverwood's Session has decided that these questions are so important, and the consequences of getting this issue wrong so grave for the church, that it requires a special, extra teaching effort on our part.

To that end, the Session has decided to combine the Sunday School classes for all ages, 6th grade and above, into one class that will examine this question in detail, using a John Piper video series entitled "What's the Difference?" as a guide. We will spend approximately 20 weeks looking at various components of this issue. These will include the concept of complimentary, Biblical male leadership, Biblical female submission, roles in the church, and

a contrast with extra-Biblical ideas popular in society in general. There will be ample time for discussion, both among men and women alone, as well as time together afterward to examine how the opposite sex has thought, perceived, and reacted to the topics.

This will be a fascinating, and hopefully illuminating time in the life of Riverwood. The Session strongly encourages all members and anyone else interested in this topic to come and participate. We are very eager to hear from our members throughout this, and we are not intimidated by any questions that may be asked. In fact, we're encouraging it. We have a team of four elders and their wives (Diane and Allen Powers, Jen and Eric Venable, Dana and Jeff Miller, and Kimberly and myself) who will be leading the discussions. All of those teaching are excited to tackle the subject and bring these issues into the open.

Our goal is to challenge all of us at Riverwood not only to know the Gospel as some sort of rote formula, but to begin to understand how it calls us to become new creatures in Christ. That goes all the way to how you relate to your girlfriend, boyfriend, or spouse. It affects how you live your life at home and in the workplace. It also makes claims on areas of intimacy and sex. In short, the Gospel changes everything, not just what we do Sundays at 11AM. It doesn't just tinker at the edges of humanity. It's more than just making better spouses or improving interpersonal relationships. It does nothing short of beginning the restoration of God's created order, which was (and is) very good.

Come join us at 9:45 Sundays in the main sanctuary as we examine Biblical manhood and womanhood, and watch God at work among his people. 

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REFLECTIONS ON THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

Sanctification and Waiting on the Day

by Bob Thornton

Riches and the things that are necessary in life are not evil in themselves. And all of us face cares and troubles in this life. The sin comes in the time and energy we spend in pursuing these things, at the expense of neglecting Christ.

~David Wilkerson

Over the past thirty years I have had the opportunity as a family physician to treat a number of people. Within the context of the confidential physician-patient relationship I've been privy to people's darkest secrets including a substantial amount of sin. The odd part is that it didn't matter who the person was – confessing Christian, agnostic, or atheist – the sin was glaring and at times egregious.

The take home message? We're all lost sinners.

So what?

I suppose that, as part of the maturing process, we all become a little more introspective as time goes on, probably a reaction to that ticking bomb in us all called death. And as I find myself looking inward, the more I see of that innermost self, the more I don't like him. The person in the mirror gazing back at me is an angry, vindictive, dissolute old man.

If you're like me, you have plenty of examples: being cut off in traffic; your boss yelling at you for turning in that project late; or standing in line for an hour at

Disney World for that new ride only to have a non-English speaking foreigner and twenty of his relatives cut in front of you probably bakes your buns.

My life is, for the most part, mundane. I'll never write a check to fund the building of a third-world hospital, develop a new anti-cancer drug that will save tens of thousands of lives, or be elected to the U.S. Senate leading to a campaign that wins the White House.

I bet you could set up a booth in the mall and, with little effort, canvass passers-by to find at least a dozen non or nominal Christians who have a resume that, next to mine, make me look like Simon Legree.

Bottom line, who am I, a Reformed Christian, in comparison to the average non-Christian on the street? We both put on a smile and pretend everything is fine when deep down we are hurting. We both coat ourselves in a thin veneer of respectability when we want others to see us as clean, upstanding citizens. You know: the old pillar of the community shtick.

So, if I'm not Tim Tebow winning critical NFL games in the last second for God, or Christian geneticist Francis Collins presiding over the National Institutes of Health, or Billy Graham preaching the gospel to tens of thousands, then who am I?

If I'm not Tim Tebow winning NFL games in the last second for God, then who am I?

Whatever good I do as a Christian can only be seen in the context of a grateful response to God's love and grace

When you get down to it, I am, first and foremost, loved by Christ, a sinner saved by grace. That puts me in a unique position – a situation that no amount of earthly accomplishments could attain.

I find myself defined not by my achievements or the lack thereof. When looked upon by the Creator of the Universe, I am seen not as some retired doctor, but through the filter of the Second Person of the Trinity. My sin is not seen, but rather Christ's righteousness. As a Christian I have been *given* the righteousness of Christ. There's nothing I've done to deserve it. And the great thing is that in a million years of good-deed-doing I could never earn it. It's all grace. In I Corinthians 1:28-30 the Word states: *“God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”*

Another great thing about God's grace is its dynamism. I am not declared righteous and then left to my own devices. According to I John 2:1-2: *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”*

Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father, an advocate for me.

And those good deeds? Where do they fit in? Since there is nothing I can do to earn salvation, whatever

good I do as a Christian can only be seen in the context of a grateful response to God's love and grace. Much like the sincere outpouring of expressions of love by a grateful child, my works can only shine in the reflected glow of God's love and grace.

But, what about that man in the mirror? The one that was so unlovable? He'll continue to be there, older, angrier and more vindictive. That's one thing about growing in grace, I see sin clearer and in high definition. It's like Paul said of himself in I Timothy 1:15: *“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”*

In the end I'm coming to realize that personal happiness, personal achievement and being the total person Oprah wants me to be is not the goal in life. Bottom line, it's not about me. We are here to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever.

And so, like a master carpenter repairing an old piece of furniture, God strips away that thin veneer of respectability that I have put on, leaving original wood beneath. He then works with that fragile substance below to craft a new piece: a finer more precious piece. As a result, on some future date as I look in the mirror, the angry, vindictive, dissolute old man staring back will have faded. And moreover, I will rejoice in the day when, in glory, I see Christ face to face. ¶

Dr. Robert Thornton is an elder of Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may contact him at rthorn3423@comcast.net.

COMPREHENSIVE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Old Methods, New Opportunities



by Kimberly Staggs

In Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, it is recorded that Moses conveyed to the Israelites:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

This is a tall order for an imperfect people. We are, of course, blessed beyond our understanding that failure to do this perfectly will not result in our condemnation, but it is still our duty as parents and fellow members of the covenant to try to carry out this monstrous task. When my brain tries to find the loophole and thinks about the fact that these are words of the Old Testament, I see that Paul reminds me pointedly in Ephesians 6, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” As a parent, I read these words and think, “What an inspired plan! If only this had been taught to me! But it was not, so how can I possibly do this?” You see, I was not raised in church. I find my knowledge of the Bible woeful. How, then, am I to bring my children up to know the Lord our God – His word and His character – better than they know themselves?

As someone who was raised in a moral, caring home without any understanding of the history and theological development that God teaches us through the Bible, I can tell you that the catch-up road is a long one and that I understand what Paul means about exasperating your children. I had no frame of reference to understand so much of what I was being asked to learn, internalize, and analyze in school. I had no knowledge of Biblical and western history. I had no knowledge of the literary contents of the Bible to say nothing of my complete ignorance of its theological meaning. Without that, I despaired of caring about much of my education. I got my education; it was a pretty good one in worldly terms, because that is what I was supposed to do, but

I did not really care about much of it. I did not see why it all mattered; in short, I completely failed to understand that the whole point of my education should have been what Moses conveyed to the Israelites in Deuteronomy: as great an understanding of God, His character, His word, and His incredible creation as my very limited brain could capture.

Beginning to attend a PCA church on a regular basis at age 28, I slowly began to realize how much I had missed in my own education. My solution, of course, was to try to learn as much as I could and as quickly as I could. As I had my children, I went to Bible studies,

book studies, Sunday school, and weekly worship, taking in all that I could. Being a self-centered sinner, however, it completely escaped me that – as Moses and Paul would have told me if I had been listening – it was incumbent upon my husband and me to see that our children's education did instill them, at every step in the road, with what I had lacked. I had read *Shepherding a Child's Heart* and *Don't Make Me Count to Three* and that had helped me figure out how to bring Scripture into the endless opportunities for discipline that I encountered each day. But it still hadn't occurred to me that Scripture verses and Bible stories were only the first step. It was not until God sent a wise woman to challenge me that I realized that I was about to send my children into the same void that I was just now beginning to escape. Sure, my children would have had the benefit of weekly Sunday School and worship services that I did not, but would my pitiful, over-committed parenting accomplish my role in teaching them to view everything from gum-chewing to marriage and career through the lens of Scripture one day? No way.

So it was that I was introduced to the world of classical and Christian education. I fought it. I thought it would be inconvenient for my career. I would have to be a stay-at-home mom doing part-time professional work on the side (okay, I was right on this one). I thought it would be expensive. I thought it would be too hard . . . for me, of course. I thought it might even be too hard for my kids, though, being a sinner, I was more worried about myself really. All of that said, over and over again, the more I read and the more I learned, the more

convinced I became that I was really peeved that no one had given this kind of education to me! So, if I couldn't have it myself, it seemed like the next best thing was to try to give it, albeit imperfectly, to my kids and my covenant kids. After all, what I wanted

most for all of the children I knew was for them to come to some understanding of their own imperfection, of the grace that God was showering upon them, of His amazing power, of His perfect plan, of the fact that His word provides us with the tools for navigating this worldly life, and of the fascinating and complex creation in which He has placed us.

How, you may reasonably ask, does a classical Christian education further this goal? In answer, it puts Christ at the center of every iota of a child's education. We learn to spell, write, and speak well because that is how we can carry God's

word and Christ's gift of grace into the world around us. We learn math because it reveals the unchanging nature of God; it is only because of God that we can always count on $2 + 2$ to equal 4. We study science because it reveals to us the unbelievable complexity and detail of which our Creator is capable. We study art and music and dance because they enable us another glimpse at both our Creator's creativity and His beauty. We study history to see His plan working itself out on all of the peoples and places in His Creation. We study the Bible because it is the word given to us by the One who unites all of our educational endeavors and informs us about our purpose and His in each and every one. In a classical and Christian school, Bible class is the venue for learning literary and theological content, but every moment of school is a

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study in how the Bible, if it is given us to pay attention, directs our every thought, speech, and action – for both the students and the teachers.

That all sounds very Christian, you may note, but to what does classical refer? Classical refers to a method of education used from the middle ages through the middle 1800s (yes, there were classical schools in Tuscaloosa before the Civil War), which is known as the trivium. As the name implies, the trivium separates a student's educational development into three stages: grammar, dialectic (also known as logic), and rhetoric. During the grammar stage, students memorize well and easily. This is the stage when the child in your backseat sings the same annoying song twenty times during a fifteen minute car ride and thoroughly enjoys it. Classical school students sing phonograms, grammar chants, math facts and processes, the countries of the world, Latin, and Bible memorization in addition to other annoying songs. During the dialectic or logic stage, students want to argue and are taught to do so with precision via the learning of formal logic. The memorization of the grammar stage comes in quite handy when students need actual facts and information with which to formulate arguments and to spot false arguments. It is also during this stage that students switch from primarily memorizing historical facts, including Biblical facts, to learning these disciplines by means of literature. Once a student has a basic understanding of history, that history can become quite alive when reading original texts. During the rhetoric stage, students focus their efforts on refining their writing and speaking to become excellent and persuasive communicators for Christ and for viewing the world through his gift to us. This

is a time of refining the skills that will enable students to learn quickly, communicate well, show grace and discernment, and defend their faith among believers and unbelievers alike.


Hmmmmm, you may be thinking, this sounds like a school for smart kids and not like a place that would be very easy to step into if you have already started down the educational road. With regard to the fallacy of “smart kids,” I have come to discover that

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God, in his wisdom, has made more different kinds of kids with different talents and ease-of-learning levels in various areas than I can possibly count. As Christians, we can't demand that our students conform to our lesson plan regardless of whether God has made their brain ready or not. What we can do, though, is identify that our role is to teach, slowly and methodically, day after day, until the teaching actually results in understanding and in an ability to apply what was taught. Then, because God is so good to remind us of who He is

over and over again in the Bible, we can review what the students have learned about God's world over and over again to ensure that what has gone in, stays in. This Biblical pattern of review that God gives us also provides the means by which students can come into classical and Christian education as the grammar years proceed. Since as much as possible is reviewed as often as possible, new students generally “pick up” those facts that they missed during previous years as other students are reminded of them during review. Like everything else about CCE, catch-up is a long-term process that requires patience, not a boot camp. More precious than the smart good student is the patient student and parent who are willing to keep working at a steady pace and wait on God's timing for the light

bulb to glow.

So, if you don't have to be super smart, you respond, isn't this a private school, not covered by the taxes that I am already forced to pay to support the public schools? How can I pay for this school, too? All I can say in response to this is that God provides. Because RCS's mission is to reinforce and remind of the teachings of the church throughout a student's school week, it is the fervent desire of the Board that any student be admitted whose parents desire for him or her a classical Christian education. For this reason, the Board works willingly with parents who have any financial obstacles and, thus far, has not had to turn away any parents because they could not afford full tuition. In the past this has been a difficult, albeit intentional, road for the Board made necessary by the church's and school's vision for the all-encompassing Christian education of covenant children. Thankfully, however, this road is being smoothed by the RPC Session. A generous increase in funding to the school for the coming year will allow for increased tuition assistance to be made available. Therefore, if you or anyone you know has any interest in a classical Christian education or has questions that need to be answered, please, please, please do not be deterred. Step forward. Ask the questions boldly. Get to know what RPC has to offer through RCS. Then, with prayer, please follow the Lord wherever He leads, for He surely is the only one who does not exasperate, and it is only through Him that we can diligently teach of Him as we sit, walk, lie, and rise each day. 

Kimberly Staggs is a member of Riverwood Presbyterian Church and the principal of Riverwood Classical School. You may contact her at kimberrystaggs@gmail.com.

INTERACT WITH CULTURE



RIVERWOOD SUNDAY SCHOOL

Join us as we study John Piper's series, "What's the Difference?" on Sunday mornings at 9:45am. This series will take a detailed look at biblical manhood and womanhood and compare and contrast those to modern perceptions. This is a very important issue, not only in the life of the church, but for our culture at large. Because it affects not only adults, but also our teenagers, we want all of our children from 6th grade and above to attend.

REFLECTIONS ON HOW GOD'S GOSPEL LOVES GOD'S LAW

Why Christians Should Strive to Love and Abide by the Law

by Eric Venable

The older I get, the more I'm convinced that a good marriage is a complex thing. One minute you can be yelling angry and fierce words at the same person who in another moment, you passionately and gently embrace. You could be a fly on a wall at a particular time in a person's marriage and be convinced that these two people must be really opposed to each other. But understood in a wider context, you begin to see that maybe the people who you thought were enemies are actually friends, even lovers. There is a certain kind of opposition in a healthy marriage that I actually believe is good, a kind that means both parties are actually really listening to each other and taking one another seriously, not an opposition that is designed to tear apart. In a way that seems counter-intuitive, a robust marriage may involve heated confrontation, but confrontation that ends in resolution, maybe a few tears, and a better sense of unity and mutual love that compliments and helps complete another.

This is really a great illustration of another complex relationship that we find in all sorts of explicit and implicit ways all throughout Scripture, the relationship between the good news of the gospel and God's law. Are God's Law and God's Gospel friends? Are they mortal enemies? Does one condemn and the other save? What exactly is the relationship between these two? And just like marriage, how we understand this complex relationship is really crucial. I believe that, just like a marriage, if we don't understand the complex dynamic of how these two realities work together, all sorts of chaos, confusion and destruction will be the

inevitable result for God's people.

Before we depart, I want to make sure everybody is tracking with me on the terms I'm using so that nobody gets lost on the onramp. By "Gospel," I mean God's acts of salvation that He has accomplished for his people through God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This refers to our entire salvation, from start to finish, spanning God's sovereign predestination of His people to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration and transformation. When the Bible uses the word "Law" with a capital "L", something you see often on the lips of Jesus or the writings of Paul, it is referring to the Jewish Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament which contained all the various laws that pertained to Israel's civil, moral and spiritual life. However, by "law," I mean all the commandments, exhortations, and statutes that God has given his people in his Word, everything from the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah to Paul's sexual ethics in his epistles.

Alright, with terms defined, let's think about this subject of law and gospel by looking at some passages of Scripture that are potentially confusing, and then at some things that clarify the relationship between the two and finally ask how this practically affects the way we live the Christian life.

If we begin even a cursory survey of what Scripture says about God's law, we quickly see that this topic is not something that can be grasped after a hurried

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reading. Instead, this is a topic that is multi-faceted and requires some sanctified thinking. Consider that the Bible says the following about God's law: The Psalmist declares in Psalm 119, "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day...Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way." Sounds pretty positive about God's law, huh?

But then hundreds of years later Paul writes this in Galatians about "the law:" "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse...But the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us". In this verse Paul quotes from the Old Testament to basically say that the law cannot save God's people, and in fact, those who have a wrong understanding of the law will actually only experience a curse from God, not his blessing. Jesus is described as a person who took on the curse of the law by becoming a person cursed by God on our behalf. The law doesn't sound too positive here, does it?

So after reading verses like these, it's very easy to wonder—how could God's people describe God's law as such a stark opposition? For some it seems that the law is something that is enormously good and leading to the goodness of God, but for others, it's clearly something that only leads to God's condemnation and curse. So which is it for God's people, a blessing or a curse?

And of course the issue of the law and gospel becomes even more complicated when we consider that God's people of the New Covenant don't follow many of the same laws that God's people in the Old Covenant did. In Acts 10, God does something that probably doesn't look like a big deal for people who aren't Jewish Christians. In one stroke, He does away with laws that His people had been following for centuries, laws that pertained to certain foods

that were not be eaten.

But then we read about Jesus proclaiming in his Sermon on the Mount that he didn't come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Jesus proclaims, "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." So reading all this makes one wonder, how has Jesus "fulfilled" the law? Has he come to do away with parts of it? All of it? How does his atoning work of the gospel relate to all the various commands that God has given his people?

First, for the writers of the New Testament, the entrance of Jesus Christ into the world and his life, death and resurrection completely transformed how they understood everything about God's word previously revealed to his people, including how they understood God's numerous laws and commands. This truth is powerfully described in Luke's account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to two of his disciples walking on a road to the city of Emmaus. Before his disciples recognize their resurrected Lord, they are chided for being slow to see that everything in Israel's Law and Prophets could only be understood in light of Jesus. Jesus tells them, "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Luke then writes, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself". For the early Jewish Christian church, Jesus was the focal point of Scripture, the hub which God's revelation revolved around. This means that everything that God had spoken to his people in the Old Testament was interpreted in light of the crucified and risen Christ and this included all of his

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Israel's laws. In light of Christ's sacrificial death, all of Israel's laws dealing with atonement, how God's people could be cleansed of sin, were fulfilled and concluded with Jesus' once-for-all-time sacrifice for sins. The writer of Hebrews tells us, "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified". Reformed theologians have called these kinds of laws "ceremonial laws" and believe that Christ has fulfilled and abolished these.

The laws that governed Israel as a nation-state, that regulated punishments for all sorts of various crimes, have also been fulfilled and abolished. This is due to the fact that God's people are now under the New Covenant, and no longer confined to the borders of any particular nation. We are now strangers and aliens in a fallen world since "...here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come", the city of the New Jerusalem that exists with God in heaven from all eternity.

That leaves us with just one more category of law that we find in the New Testament, laws Reformed Christians have historically referred to as the "moral law." This is a theological topic that has gotten lots of ink over the years especially since the time of the Reformation. And this is really the most crucial aspect of God's law for believers living in the New Testament era who are seeking to be faithful to the commands and statutes throughout Scripture.

The Westminster Confession of Faith says the following about the "moral law": "The moral law does forever bind all, as well as justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in

respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither does Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much rather strengthen this obligation." In other words, the moral law is here to stay for us as New Covenant-era Christians. In no way does the good news of what Jesus has done in his life, death and Resurrection abolish the need for Christians to look to the law. But the big question that immediately comes into our minds is, what good is pursuing the moral law if I'm not saved on the basis of whether or not I obey? Well, it's all about *why* we obey the law. If we honestly think that salvation comes through obedience to it, then we will be sorely disappointed if we think anyone can honestly achieve God's approval in this way.

And this is precisely Paul's point whenever he says things that those who rely on the works of the law for salvation are under a curse. *Be very careful that you understand this distinction.* Whenever Paul seems to be going after the law, it's not really seeking to obey the law that he has a real problem with. Instead, it's all about the *why* of our obedience. If it's to earn our salvation, then Paul along with the rest of Scripture emphatically denies that human beings will ever reach eternal salvation. Those who seek to make things right with God through their obedience should take heed of Paul's warning in Romans, "For by works of the law no human being should be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Our sin cannot simply be canceled out through human effort. If we could do this, this would effectively mean that God isn't very holy and perfect or that human efforts could somehow achieve the status of perfection, a perfection good enough to please a holy and perfect God. Both of these are things that the Bible explicitly tells us are false and impossible.

Alright, so what are some concluding applications of

all of this for how we live the Christian life? *First, Christians should actually love God's law more than Pharisees do.* And this is true not because we're convinced that the law makes us right before God, but because we know that the law comes from a gracious, wise and loving Father, not a Judge who is out to throw the book at us and put us away for the crimes we have committed.

Because of the gospel, the Law no longer leaves us utterly condemned or hopelessly deluded into thinking we are people who have any righteousness in ourselves. Instead, we have been set free to follow its wise counsel and direction knowing that we will not be cast out of God's kingdom when we disobey it and having the assurance that the power of the Holy Spirit is at work inside of us, enabling us more and more to actually do what it says out of joy and gratitude, not slavish fear. The gospel of Jesus has "hushed the law's loud thunder" as the hymn *Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder* exclaims, a thunder that is felt only when looking to it as a means of being saved.

A Pharisee's pursuit of obedience to God's law will create people who always teeter between a vicious cycle of self-righteousness and total despair. They experience self-righteousness because they falsely think that God is honestly impressed with their obedience which therefore makes them morally superior people. But for those who begin to take their own sin seriously, they cannot be lured into believing that fallen human efforts to obey God's law are enough to earn his infinite, righteous approval. Unless one, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, sees that Jesus offers real forgiveness and grace only through his work, human beings will be left to ultimate despair in their pursuits of law-keeping.

But we need to see that the Christian has radically different reasons for seeking to obey God's law. We want to obey it precisely *because* we know that we cannot earn God's favor through it. Instead we have received God's infinite approval as a free gift in

Christ. This means that we are now free to pursue the wisdom of God's commandments without the threat of damnation hanging over us if we disobey. This means that when we do disobey, we disobey as children dearly loved by our heavenly Father who will correct and discipline in the face of disobedience, but never cast us out of his family and away from his loving care.

Second, we should be very careful that we are rightly understanding what exactly words like "legalism" and "moralism" mean. "Legalist" according to the Bible is not defined as a person who is earnestly seeking to follow God's laws, but instead someone who is doing this for all the wrong reasons. The problem with "legalists" is certainly not the fact that they are so sincere about trying to follow God's laws. For those of who have only been around uses of God's law that were dripping with a self-righteous, Pharisaical attitude, this is likely hard to understand. How could the Law be anything but opposed to the gospel? Isn't the law only meant to leave us condemned and helpless so that we run to Jesus? Isn't a pursuit of the law something that Pharisees do? But we need to be really careful that we don't commit the common mistake of being reactionary and throwing the baby out with the bath water (something I believed Reformed believers are very susceptible to doing). Having a biblical understanding of God's law doesn't mean that we are never zealous for Biblical morality, just that we emphatically deny that our morality saves us. This would be the tail wagging the dog. Rather, we are passionate about following the morality of God's law precisely because what is at stake is not our salvation, but whether or not we will enjoy the blessings that come from submitting to God's gracious law given to sinners who have been redeemed through Jesus. ¶

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FINALE

On the Nature of Love

Americans have such impossible and wrong-headed views of love. Love has become the thing that makes **us** happy. Millions of books, television and movies spin this fallacy, constantly making us miserable unless our egos are warm, purring kittens, sated with stroking. Materialism plays a part in our view, providing the comfort that we have come to think of as our heritage and our due. In this entertaining, electronically exciting, but very safe world, love is the finishing touch, something we think we must have.

This tendency is so ingrained in us that we have transferred it, often unaware of the irony, into our Faith. Our modern evangelical world of “your best life now” and the elitism that comes from our moral achievements over lesser types becomes a part of this idea as well. We subconsciously make the love of Jesus into a love that insists on us being happy right now, and right here. We never consider the servanthood requirements imposed on us by the example of our Savior, and if we do, our serving actions are clean, brief and without love and are actions we insist on being thanked and praised about.

This poem, *Those Winter Sundays*, by the African-American poet, Robert Hayden (1913-1980) speaks of a man remembering the servant love of his father when he would rise early on Sunday and prepare for church, a love unrecognized and unnoticed. Only later, when the poet became an adult, could he recognize the depth and nature of his father's love for him. The poem is a lesson in *austere and lonely* loving, a lesson we should pay attention to and seek to emulate.

Those Winter Sundays

*Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.*

*I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,*

*Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?*

~Robert Hayden
(1913-1980)

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