

It's Not Rubbing the Genie's Magic Lamp

Oct. 25, 2011

Recently I heard a young man share his story of battling his unwanted same-sex attractions. Though Ben's dad loved him very much, he felt like he was everyone else's dad and *then* his dad. He also didn't connect with the masculine that his dad represented. He ended up with longings for deep connection with males. What helped him turn the corner was when he found people with whom he could be completely honest about his shameful desires and feelings, who also helped him develop his relationship with God.

He shared that he slowly realized his heart was looking for three things in other men. First, he longed for someone who was unquestionably a "Capital M-A-N" who made that intangible connection with him that his father didn't make, leaving him with a father-shaped hole in his soul. And he realized that he was also looking for a rescuer, to pull him out of his own wretchedness. And finally, he wanted to be comforted by someone, he said, "who's there when I come back down, when I'm lost, when I'm troubled; I would fantasize about a guy who could just say the right things, do the right things, and comfort me any time I needed it."

Optimally, he told us, it would really great if he could find someone who would be all three of those things at one time, wrapped up in one person. That would be the "Mr. Right" he longed to find and be loved by.

The major "lightbulb moment" of his journey came when he realized that what he longed for was a Father, a Savior, and a Comforter. . . and that perfectly describes who God is—three in one, Father, Son and Spirit. And because he had trusted in

Christ at an early age, that very God was already indwelling him! He realized that the triune God was everything his heart was longing for but he had been too blind to see. God, in giving Himself to His beloved son, was ready to meet Ben's heart's needs and longings, but would not force Himself on him. When Ben opened his heart to receive the Fathering, the Saving, and the Comforting of the God who loved him, everything shifted inside.

God connected some dots for *me* when hours later, our pastor observed that Psalm 37:4 is one of the first Bible verses that people memorize. . . and one of the most misunderstood.

Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.

Sounds like a magic formula, right? Delight yourself in the Lord, and you get what you want? Just a religious-sounding way of rubbing the genie's magic lamp to get your wishes granted? But that's not what it means.

When we delight ourselves in the Lord, He gives us Himself, and *He* is what our hearts desire. Uncover all the surface, temporary things we think we want, and underneath are the true desires of our heart: to be loved, to be known, to be valued, to be safe, to *matter*.

And as Ben showed us, to be fathered, to be rescued, to be comforted.

Yes, we want all those things—and our marvelous God delights to give them to us as He gives us Himself.

He is so good!

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DWTS and the T in GLBT

The big controversy in the current season of Dancing With the Stars is the presence of Chaz Bono, born Chastity, the daughter of pop icons Sonny and Cher. The media has documented Chaz' transition from female to male, bringing "transgender" into people's living rooms and water cooler conversations.



For over a decade, I have loved and walked with people struggling with their gender identity and unwanted same-sex attractions. When I see Chaz, my heart just aches deeply.

How should we wisely, biblically, and compassionately think about those who feel trapped in the body of the opposite sex? [I am not talking about those who were born with chromosomal abnormalities or an endocrine imbalance, which results in hermaphroditism, or—the new term—intersex. These are biological effects of living in a fallen world, and are in a different category from those born with normal, functioning bodies who want to change those bodies.]

People who identify as transgender report feeling different from a young age, which is easy to describe as feeling "born that way," especially when that is the new banner cry of the marginalized, thanks to Lady Gaga's mega-hit of the same name. But it's a big (and, I would respectfully suggest, tragic) step from "I have always felt different from the other boys/girls" to "I am a girl in a boy's body" or "I am a boy in a girl's body."

I would suggest that the core misunderstanding of those in the

GLBT (gay | lesbian | bi-sexual | transgendered) community is the same core misunderstanding of the vast majority of people: a too-narrow understanding of God-designed variations in masculinity and femininity. (Please see my blog post "[The Gender Spectrum](#).") Many of my friends who struggle with same-sex attraction confess that they've often thought how much better life would be if they were the other gender, but transgender-identifying folks take the fantasy to a new level.

The fantasy that "becoming something other than what I am will make me happy" marks transgender. It's wrapped up in a deep-seated envy of the opposite sex, and a hatred of one's own gender. That's why so many believe that surgery to remove the offending body parts will kill what they detest in themselves, their own gender, and transform them into what they admire and believe will give them life.

Fantasy and pretending are part of childhood, but now thanks to advances in technology, an adult can gain access to medical treatments that will feed the fantasy and turn it into reality—or at least the promise of it. Our post-modern culture invents words and redefines language in ways that adds layers of confusion to the issue: instead of the dual simplicity of God creating male and female, we are now told that there is a difference between sex, gender, and sexual identity. No wonder there is so much confusion about this issue!

"I am a man in a woman's body, and I need to bring my outsides into alignment with my insides." (Or the opposite.) This feeling may be strong, but it is not accurate, and it is not trustworthy. We are fallen people living in a fallen world with fallen understanding, and we should not trust our conclusions when they vary so much with what God has said. He declares Himself as our Creator; when God creates a female, which we know by the female body He creates, He is making a statement about His intention for that girl. When God gives us the stewardship over His creation, which includes our bodies, that precludes mutilating them by amputating healthy body

parts because we hate them.

Our culture looks at life through a purely naturalistic, materialistic lens that excludes the spiritual. Our feelings are part of that total focus on the temporal and transitory. When they are particularly strong, they can be all-consuming, and it's easy to say they are true—regardless of what God says in His word. Some people insist that their brains and bodies are mismatched, that transgender is a purely biological issue that, thanks to modern medicine, can be addressed instead of leaving them feeling miserable.

We are broken people, and we try to fix our own brokenness with our own broken methods: enter sex-change clinics. One of the heartbreaking aspects of this issue is what is NOT told to those putting their eggs in the sex-change basket. I had a very long talk one night with a MtF (male to female) post-op transgender woman who blessed me with her heart-wrenching honesty. She was so sure that she would get affirmation and praise as a woman, that the hole in her heart would be filled by what she would see in the mirror. Many surgeries later, from penis amputation to cosmetic surgery to reduce her adam's apple, when she looked in the mirror she saw a man trying unsuccessfully to be what God did not make him to be, and it broke her heart. She said she would give anything to go back to the way God had made her as a him, but now she felt stuck maintaining the charade because that was her identity, both personally and professionally.

This story is one of the reasons psychiatrist Dr. Paul McHugh shut down the sex-change program at Johns Hopkins University Hospital. In his extraordinary article "[Surgical Sex](#)," he wrote, "When I became psychiatrist-in-chief at Johns Hopkins, I realized that by doing sex-change operations the hospital was fundamentally cooperating with a mental illness. We would do better for these patients, I thought, by concentrating on trying to fix their minds and not their genitalia."

I am grateful for the voices of those who have walked deep in the transgender waters and then decided to listen to God (mainly from the helpful website help4families.com): “I remember reading in the Word that our bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit, and I wondered, ‘What have I done to myself?’ After reading Psalm 139, I began to cry because it spoke of how God had created me and how He had known me from the beginning.”

“I had a hard time having fun, because when I was out with my friends I was jealous of the girls and fun they were having. That started to become a theme in my life, I was jealous of females; their curves, softness, and what I perceived as superiority over men. I hated everything about my masculinity; I had fantasies at times of castrating myself and ending the control of testosterone over my life.”

“I told my wife I was leaving and wanted to divorce and transition to becoming a woman. I went out and bought supplies and women’s clothing that night, and went to hotel room. I won’t go into all the details, but as I sat there in all my ‘feminine glory,’ reading on my computer the stories of other TS folks I remember praying ‘God what am I doing???’ And I remember this still small voice ask, ‘Is this what you really want?’ My response was ‘No, what should I do?’ and what I heard still rings in my head to this day: ‘Run!! Run back to your wife.’ So I did, my wife being the faithful, loving, and godly woman that she is accepted me back, and forgave me. . .

“[Later on] I again told my wife that I could no longer live this life and that I needed to leave to pursue my ‘true life’ as a female. I left my wife that night and told her that I wanted to separate. As I left to go back out and check into a

hotel, I was feeling really angry with God. I was yelling on the drive, 'God, this is bigger than You. I can't do this anymore, I am so tired of fighting and I just want to live the way that my mind wants me to live.' I remember God distinctly telling me, 'I am your Father and you are My son. You do not need to do this; you need to get your significance from Me.' I yelled back, 'No God I am done with this crap, this is ridiculous, I am living a lie and I need to be female.' I wrestled and wrestled with this for hours. Finally I was worn down and just asked God, 'What do I need to do?' The answer I got was, 'Get your significance from Me, not from being female. You need to follow Me and love Me more than this.'

"I was worshiping femininity and was ready to sacrifice myself, my wife and my children on that altar. After searching my heart I also realized that I was angry with God, I think mostly for not 'fixing me' the way I wanted. I wanted to pray the prayer and any desire to be female would be gone and I would be some sort of super-man. When God did not fix me this way after years of praying for it, I became bitter."

"If He had intended me to be a woman, He wouldn't have made me male in the first place."

May those who struggle with the lie that they are not okay as they are, find their significance in God who made them the way He wanted them, who delights in them, who loves them with a tender, compassionate love, and says, "Come to Me. Don't try to fix this on your own. Let Me pour truth and grace, love and life into your heart."

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On Gender and Refusing to Disclose It

There was a storm of controversy recently (June 7, 2011) over a Toronto couple's [announcement](#) that they were not disclosing the sex of their now 4-month-old baby. They "believe they are giving their children the freedom to choose who they want to be, unconstrained by social norms about males and females." Not only are they raising their child Storm to be genderless, but they decided not to tell the world—and the world did not like that one bit.

The mother, Kathy Witterick, writes, "When the baby comes out, even the people who love you the most and know you so intimately, the first question they ask is, 'Is it a girl or a boy?' If you really want to get to know someone, you don't ask what's between their legs." But genitals are only one indication of sex; gender-bound brain structures and chromosomes also delineate the fact that we live in a boy/girl world. And the way God set things up—to maintain the boy/girl distinction—you don't have to ask what's between someone's legs because there are plenty of other signs far less intimate.

Ms. Witterick and her husband, David Stocker, hold a loose ideology about gender, which they are encouraging in Storm's brothers, Jazz (five years old) and Kio (two). Jazz loves traditionally girly things like pink and purple, and chooses to wear his hair long in braids, which regularly invites people to assume he's a girl. His parents give him total freedom in how he presents himself.

“It is true that my oldest son Jazz does not have a traditional notion of what boys should wear, look like or do. It is also true that we believe our children should have the right to choose their clothes and hairstyle. Jazz has a strong sense of being a boy, and he understands that his choices to wear pink and have long hair are not always acceptable to his community. He chooses freely to do them anyway, because he also has been taught to respect difference, love himself and navigate the world in a way that is true to his own voice.”

This is a five-year-old boy. How free is he, really, to make choices that he “understands” are “not always acceptable to his community”? How much understanding of the nature of the world does a five-year-old have?

Jazz’s mom suppresses her natural instincts in order to parent ideologically:

“In my heart of hearts, I squirm when my son picks a dress from the rack (won’t people tease him?), even though I know from experience and research that the argument that children need a binary gender orthodoxy taught to them in order to feel safe is simply incorrect.”

I would suggest that teaching “a binary gender orthodoxy” is not incorrect; it is woven into the very nature of how things are because God made it that way: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Genesis 1:27) When we depart from a biblical explanation and understanding of reality, and we start making it up as we go along, we invite chaos and confusion.

I think she’s right to squirm when her son picks a dress from the rack, and not just because people will tease him. The binary nature of gender is part of God’s plan for helping us maintain boundaries between things that need to be kept separate. The Old Testament includes a prohibition against cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5) to support the natural

distinction between the sexes. Creating confusion by dressing in the other gender's clothes is not consistent with God's intent to maintain separations between things that should not be confused or blurred. Genesis 1 tells us that He separated the light from the darkness, the waters above from the waters below, the land from the sea. And when he created humans, He created them in two distinctly different types: male and female. Then, in Isaiah 5:20 He said, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"

I do understand the frustrations of Storm's parents concerning society's too-narrow definitions of boy and girl. (Please see my blog post "[The Gender Spectrum](#).") Jazz is one of those [emotionally sensitive boys](#) who delight in color, texture, fabrics and vibrancy, and his parents apparently fully support the kind of gifted, creative boy he is, which is great. But when parents fully indulge a boy's gravitation to pink, and dresses, and long hair, yet he wants other people to know he's a boy (as Jazz does), there's some needless confusion going on because of a lack of common-sense boundaries.

There's another aspect of this philosophy of parenting that is disturbing: the desire for children to discover "their true gender self," as psychologist Diane Ehrensaft puts it, and to choose what they want to be. Storm's mama wrote,

"[I]n not telling the gender of my precious baby, I am saying to the world, 'Please can you just let Storm discover for him/herself what s(he) wants to be?!. . . . We've decided not to share Storm's sex for now—a tribute to freedom and choice in place of limitation, a stand up to what the world could become in Storm's lifetime (a more progressive place? ...)"

There are lots of legitimate choices that children can make for themselves, and exercising those "choosing muscles"

develops self-confidence. But some choices are not legitimate: deciding whether or not to brush their teeth, refusing to eat anything but junk foods, discovering their own religious “truths”. . . and choosing their gender, regardless of what their body tells them. From a biblical perspective, God as creator is the one who gets to choose a child’s gender, and His choice is revealed in the first moment of birth: “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” It is our place as His creations to accept and embrace God’s choice for us, not insist on the personal freedom to define ourselves according to our own limited ways of understanding. That is anarchy. That kind of independence from God is the essence of sin.

I am reminded of the deep wisdom of Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” Just because something sounds good to us at the time doesn’t mean it will end up well. And this seems especially true of encouraging children to make their own paths without parental limitations.

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Helping Homosexuals Change? Yeah, Right.

ABC News recently did a story on presidential candidate Michele Bachmann’s family business, a Christian counseling center run by her husband, Dr. Marcus Bachmann. The focus of the story was a biased, “can you believe this?” exposé of the fact that the counselors help people who don’t want to be gay,

address their unwanted homosexuality.

They interviewed two people, a man whose mother had taken him to the clinic when he came out as homosexual, and an undercover reporter who brought two recording devices into the sessions with him. Neither man believed their homosexuality was changeable—and when it comes to the counseling office, if your mind is made up that something cannot be changed, guess what? It won't be.

The reporter used the now-familiar phrase “pray away the gay,” which is an effective and condescending dismissal of what actually happens when people do successfully shift their sexual orientation. (And I personally know a number of people who have experienced significant and lasting change in their orientation.) Some do successfully engage in reparative therapy, which addresses the emotional deficits in those who find themselves attracted to the same sex using purely psychological methods. But what is more effective is the transforming power of the gospel in the life of a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. And, like all discipline of radical discipleship, which means saying “no” to our flesh and “yes” to the flow of Jesus' resurrection power in our lives, it takes hard work over a period of years. There is no easy, 1-2-3 magic prayer to change the way we think and feel. Sanctification is a long process of cooperation with the Spirit of God.

The message our media pumps out today is that sexuality is fluid—except for homosexuality, which is fixed and can't be changed. This means it's okay to give into your secret cravings and come out as gay, in which case folks like Oprah will celebrate you embracing your “authentic self,” but it's not okay to say, “God didn't make me gay, and I choose to accept the identity HE gives me instead.” It's not okay to say, “I used to be gay and now I'm not.”

Which explains why there was an explosion of rage when Dr.

Robert Spitzer, eminent professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, released the results of his [landmark 2001 study](#) that showed that change is possible in highly motivated individuals: rare, in his estimation, but possible. (Dr. Spitzer had been the pro-gay lobby's hero since he spearheaded the American Psychiatric Association's removal of homosexuality from the DSM-IV manual, which is the psychiatrists' bible of mental disorders. That decision was the result of caving into political pressure, not the result of any research.)

The idea that people can experience change not only in their behavior but in their hearts is threatening to those committed to the idea of homosexuality as a fixed and unchangeable truth. (I personally believe the reason for their insistence is an understandable defensive reaction to trying to change their orientation on their own unsuccessfully, including attempting to "pray away the gay," which doesn't work. I have written about why that is, [here](#).)

Many of the loud voices insisting that homosexuality is not changeable hold to an unrealistic standard, that only a complete shift from 100% homosexual to 100% heterosexual constitutes change. I suggest that nowhere else do we hold to that standard: would we denounce a former alcoholic who has successfully lived for years in freedom from the destruction of alcohol, as not really changed if he thinks that a cold beer on a hot day still sounds good?

Dr. Spitzer's findings back up the message of the New Testament: that Jesus Christ changes the lives and thus the behavior of people caught in all kinds of sin. Remember this list of changed people in the church of Corinth?

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners, practicing homosexuals, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, the

verbally abusive, and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God. Some of you once lived this way. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Change is possible. That is part of the good news of the gospel. And, for the believer in Jesus, change is a normal and expected part of being a follower of Christ.

Even if the world laughs at the notion with a “can you believe this?” contempt. Can homosexuals change? It’s not “Yeah, right.” It’s “Yes! Amen!”

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What the Dallas Mavericks Show Us About Worship

We had a little excitement here in Dallas last week (June 20, 2011). Our Mavericks won the NBA Title. (For you non-sports people—like me, actually—this means that our local professional basketball team won the game that makes them Best Basketball Team in the U.S. It’s like winning the World Series. Or the Superbowl. It’s really big.)

The game was on the TV in our living room, and I (being a non-sports people) was working on my laptop in the same room. I enjoyed watching the Facebook news feed churn out all kinds of happy updates from ecstatic fans. Then the news showed over five thousand Mavs fans crazy happy outside the American

Airlines Center in Dallas, the reporters giddy with excitement and the cameras recording people who looked like they were ready to explode with joy. Immediately, scores of people drove to sporting goods stores to buy t-shirts commemorating the freshly-minted champions.

This corporate fervor was so much more than simply being pleased that the home town boys had won a championship! Everybody was a Mavericks fan that night and for the next week, especially leading up to the big parade in downtown Dallas. People were thrilled by the almost electrical connection to The Mavs as a winning team – and the joy of being a part of something bigger than themselves. People streamed to downtown Dallas the night of the big win and to the parade the following Thursday so they could be with other people honoring and praising the heroes.

I was struck by this great illustration of our hearts' desire to be connected to the transcendent, to be part of something bigger and more important than ourselves. Our hearts were made for something greater than our lives and our individual stories; I believe our hearts were made for Kingdom living, and for a quality and quantity of Life that is far more and better than our puny little earthly kingdoms. And there is something powerful, almost magical, about being connected to a community of joyful people all celebrating the Something-Bigger-Than-Ourselves together. I believe our hearts were made to be knitted together with other Kingdom hearts as well.

People's desires to shout out happy praises for Dirk Nowitzki (the Mavericks' superhero) and the rest of the team was, I believe, a part of our design to be worshipers. We were made to worship—and if we won't worship the One most worthy of worship, our Creator and Lord, then we will worship the creation. Such as the Mavericks. We are incorrigible worshipers. And there is such a feeling of "rightness" when we worship, because that is how we are made. Perhaps those who get the most excited about whooping and hollering at

professional and college (and even high school and younger) sporting games, just might be the best worship leaders some of us will ever see, if they would direct their worship to the One worship was created for!

Whenever I hear people say they think heaven will be boring, like one interminable church service, I think about times like the Mavs' win. Yeah, heaven will be boring like the Mavs winning the NBA title is boring! We were made for worship, and worship is joyous, ecstatic union with God and with other worshipers. So maybe, just maybe, all the hoopla over our team winning the title is an emotional peek into what heaven will be?

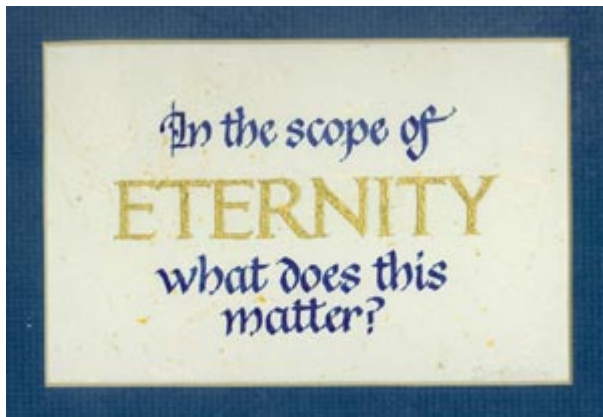
Bring it on!

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In the Scope of Eternity. . .

There's a piece of my calligraphy in our bathroom, where it's been for many years in a place where my sons would see it (over the commode!), of one of life's most important questions: "In the scope of eternity, what does this matter?"



This simple question can create a lens or filter through which we can assign value and importance to our experiences. It helps us know if something is worth getting upset about or not. If it's not going to matter two weeks from now, much less in eternity, *let it go*. Many of our stressors would be less stressful if we would just put them in perspective.

Both of my sons were athletes when they were growing up. They had a full supply of testosterone and were quite competitive. When you play sports, there are going to be wins and losses; when you're a boy or a young man, you can think those wins and losses are a lot more important than they actually are. But when filtered through the question, "In the scope of eternity, what does this matter," you can see both wins and losses as valuable for teaching and revealing character. (I put another calligraphy plaque in the bathroom as well: "Win without boasting, lose without excuses.")

I find myself invoking this question when trying to encourage people caught in the throes of temptation. One of my friends is in the excruciating process of withdrawing from an addictive and sinful relationship. I ask her, "One hundred years from today, where will you be? When you are facing Jesus, what do you want to be glad you did now, and what do you want to avoid regretting? Think back on this difficult time from the position of one hundred years from today, when you are in eternity."

One of my dear ones has been doing hard work in counseling for

over a year. When the challenge of facing one's internal pain is filtered through this question about eternity, it is encouraging to realize that cooperating with the Holy Spirit to uncover and relinquish his unhealed and broken parts is changing him forever, making him more fit for future Kingdom responsibilities and glory. The answer to the question, "In the scope of eternity, what does this matter," is "The hard work and pain will be totally worth it."

It's helpful to ask myself this question when I'm experiencing nighttime sleeplessness, or physical pain, or financial stress. And it's also helpful to ask myself this question when I'm concerned about my loved ones; when the answer is, "In the scope of eternity, this is REALLY important," it motivates me to pray. Hard. And long.

What are you wrestling with? In the scope of eternity, what does it matter, really? Does this question help?

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Is it Time to Change Your Filter?

Life doesn't just happen to us; we experience it and interpret it through a filter. That filter, like a pair of glasses, consists of beliefs and values we might not even realize we hold.

The same event could be experienced and interpreted in

different ways by different people because of their different filters: for example, getting a flat tire. One person might get out of the car, see the flat, and start to rage: “What the **** is this? Why does this kind of **** always happen to me? You stupid tire!” This response is the result of a filter that believes life should be good and easy, that nothing bad should ever happen to her. This unrealistic expectation is a setup for massive disappointment and anger when life doesn’t cooperate.

Another person might see the flat and think, “Oh bummer! Well, Lord, thank You for protecting me from a dangerous high-speed blowout. Please help me here—would You send a road angel to help me change out the spare?” This very different response is the result of a filter that recognizes we live in a fallen world where unfortunate and even bad things happen, but God is still good and we can call on Him to help us at any and every time.

We can’t change life or the things that happen to us, but we can change our filter to bring it into alignment with biblical truth.

You might need to change your filter if:

- You consistently see the glass half-empty instead of half-full; if you always put a negative spin on any news you hear. [Check out Philippians 4:8]
- You see any comment other than glowing praise as a personal attack that threatens your well-being, and you aggressively growl back. [Check out Philippians 2:3]
- You dismiss other people’s answers to prayers, and blessings they receive, as yet more proof that God loves everybody but you. [Check out Romans 8:38-39]
- You evaluate everything in terms of how you feel about it. You are nice to your spouse or your co-worker only when you

feel like being nice; you don't repent if you don't feel repentant; you don't spend time with God if you don't feel like it; you are obedient when you feel like being obedient, etc. [Check out 2 Corinthians 10:5-6]

- You view everything in terms of the here-and-now, temporal, earthly sphere, and ignore the eternal, spiritual dimension. [Check out 2 Corinthians 4:18]
- You get uncomfortable when people bring spiritual conversations into Monday through Saturday because they only belong to Sunday. [Check out all references to the Lord Jesus Christ]

What do you think. . . is it time to change your filter?

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Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life. Like It or Not.

Recently I have been engaging in an email conversation with a lady who is deeply burdened by the sinful choices and ungodly thinking of a young man dear to her. As we have talked about what she can do, our conversation turned to prayer. Yesterday she asked, "How does intercessory prayer make/change/mediate the young man's own will? How does the person we pray for 'get the message'? How can we pray for God's will to be done when it is against the will of the person we're praying for? How

does our prayer help the person to *want* God's will for themselves? How does my intercessory prayer help the person I'm praying for yield their own will and turn it over to God's will?"

I answered, "You're asking about the mechanics of how something spiritual works, and I don't know that the Word gives us that kind of information. But think about how *you* have changed *your* thinking about anything. How did you go from being dead in your trespasses and sins, to being alive in Christ? How did you go from caring more about yourself than anyone else (because sinful humanity is inherently selfish) to having a desire to pray selflessly for others?"

"I would suggest that God gave you enlightenment, showing you more and more truth, at the same time drawing you into His own heart. You started gravitating toward what was true, and Jesus said, 'I am the truth.'

"At the same time, God never violated your will, allowing you to freely choose to turn to Him in faith and in choices that matured you. How those work together, I don't think anyone understands."

Ah. Mystery. We keep running into it, don't we? And that makes sense, since God is so other, so immense, so brilliant—do we really expect that we would be able to figure out how the spiritual realm works, much less figuring out God Himself? But with our modernist, Western, scientific mindset, we are set up to disdain mystery (and all things supernatural). The progression of scientific knowledge and understanding has stripped the apparently mystical and miraculous from things like how babies are conceived and how illness spreads. Our culture's misplaced confidence in science to solve all problems extends to mystery; we tend to think, "Oh, we just haven't figured it out yet. . .but we will."

We want to know *how things work*, and there's nothing wrong

with that. I think that wrestling with that question is one way we can love God with our minds (Matt. 22:37). But there are also going to be times to choose to be content with mystery, and let it serve its role of pointing us to the One who delights to weave mystery into life like a divine tapestry.

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Feelings: A Lousy Idol

It's so easy to look down our 21st-century noses at the "primitive" peoples of biblical times, especially Israel's problems with idolatry in the Old Testament. "WE don't bow down before idols and false gods," we think. "That was when people were less evolved intellectually and spiritually, but we modern people are so much better than that."

I'm wondering if God agrees. I don't think so.

I think that idolatry is at least as rampant in our society, but it's more pervasive because it's so subtle; the idols we worship aren't physical, tangible items. We could create a long list of the abstractions we worship, but today I just want to focus on one.

Feelings.

Our culture treats feelings as if they were an inerrant internal compass that always points to truth and reality. "Follow your heart." "What does your gut say?" "You can't help

who you fall in love with.”

High school and college students flunk out because they don't **feel** like getting out of bed and going to school. Then they become people who lose their jobs because they don't **feel** like going to work.

Young people of all ages dress, act, and talk in ways that will make them **feel** popular and accepted by their peers.

Married people find themselves attracted to someone other than their spouse, and they feed the marvelous feelings of infatuation because it makes them **feel** so alive and magical.

We indulge bodily appetites, whether for sweets or drink or overeating or sexual pleasure, because they **feel** so good and because refusing to indulge them **feels** so bad.

The materialism porn of magazines and newspapers starts an internal burning desire to buy and to accumulate. It **feels** so right to go out and get what we want! If we don't have the money, we put it on credit because, hey, “I should have what I want.”

We are happily addicted to our comfort because we believe that **feeling** comfortable is a basic right of life. So we don't give ourselves away in service projects or missions trips or going without in order to use the money for someone who has less than we do, because then we wouldn't **feel** so comfortable.

Why is this? Why do we make our feelings into idols?

I believe it's because the toxic [“pickling brine”](#) of our culture puts a much higher emphasis on the immediate, the here-and-now, of the physical world (which our feelings are part of). The majority of Christians, the research shows, think just like the non-Christian world around us, and that includes ignoring the unseen, eternal world and focusing on the visible, temporal world.

When we recalibrate our focus to include the unseen sphere of life, we are aware of the spiritual dimension of life and not just the physical. It makes us more balanced people. We can put feelings in their place: they are like lights on the dashboard of our car, indicating what's going on "under the hood." But if we focus on the dashboard lights while we drive, instead of on the road, we'll run off the road—or worse, crash. We can acknowledge them but refuse to let them lead us.

For example, Hebrews 12:2 tells us that the Lord Jesus "for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame." He focused on the eternal (the joy set before Him) instead of the temporal (the shame of the cross). Corrie Ten Boom wisely said, "Don't pray when you feel like it. Have an appointment with the Lord and keep it." This lady really understood how to put feelings in their place. This survivor of the WWII death camps also said, "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."

Feelings are not evil; we have feelings because we are made in the image of a passionate God who experiences a robust range of feelings. But they *are* fallen because everything about us is fallen ever since sin entered the world.

That's why feelings make lousy idols.

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Funeral Myths

I went to a friend's funeral yesterday where I heard a number of things to add to my running mental list of "funeral myths." With the ever-increasing degree of Bible Illiteracy, combined with the growing number of believers who are "cultural captives," more conformed to the culture than to Christ (please see my earlier blog ["Are You a Pickle?"](#)), it's not surprising that people would have unbiblical beliefs about death, heaven, and God.

Several songs were played at my friend's funeral. One is called "Borrowed Angels," which started like this:

They shine a little brighter, they feel a little more
They touch your life in ways no one has ever done before
They love a little stronger, they live to give their best
They make our lives so blest, so why do they go so soon?
The ones with souls so beautiful
I heard someone say—

There must be Borrowed Angels, here in this life
They come along, into this world, and make this world bright
But they can't stay forever
Cause they're heaven sent
And sometimes, heaven needs them back again

No, people are not "borrowed angels." God created the angels before He created mankind. We are very different from angels; they were created to serve God and serve us, and we are created to be drawn into and enjoy the love, fellowship, joy and delight of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They made us in Their image (Genesis 1:26), which elevates us above angels. People and angels are two different kinds of creation, and one does not become the other.

Which brings me to another myth I heard yesterday: that

Valerie is now “our guardian angel.” While this may be a comforting thought to those gripped by loss, no she’s not. She’s enjoying unhindered, face-to-face worship of Jesus and fellowship with those who now live in heaven.

Do we have guardian angels? The Bible doesn’t give a definitive answer on that, although the Lord Jesus did say, “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). And Psalm 91:11 promises, “For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways” (from my article [Angels: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#) at Probe.org).

At yesterday’s funeral, people stood up to make comments about our friend. One distraught lady concluded her remarks with an angry, “God, You’d better take good care of her.” My heart went out to her, not just because of her grief but because she doesn’t know that God is good and doesn’t need to be cajoled, much less threatened, into caring for His beloved daughter. Sometimes people get angry with God for taking someone home earlier than they want, and the anger comes from a sense of betrayal—as if God doesn’t have the right to determine the length of a person’s life. Yet Psalm 139:16 says, “All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.” None of us lives a single day more, or less, than God had determined before He even created us. *A loving God is in control*—and that extends to the days of our birth and our death.

The man who conducted the funeral told a story about how they used to keep a little girl in their family in line by threatening that Valerie would get after her with her spanking switch. “Well now Valerie’s not here,” he told us, “so we tell the little girl, “Valerie’s got her spanking switch with her in heaven and when you get up there she’s gonna bust your butt.”

Uh, no.

Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Valerie's not busting any butts in heaven, and part of the good news is that God isn't either!

When my aunt died, someone tucked a deck of cards under her hands in her casket because Aunt Maggi loved to play cards and they were sure she was having a great time up in heaven playing pinochle with her brothers. When my mother died, several relatives comforted each other by laughing about how Mom had finally joined the great heavenly card party. This is another myth about heaven, that it's a lot like our human activities on earth, only better. People who believe this myth usually have no concept of the greatness and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, or they wouldn't be willing to settle for images of unending card games and fishing and bowling tournaments.

What funeral myths have *you* come across?

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