How Can I Make God Answer My Prayers My Way?

How can I get God to give me what I want? That’s often at the root of our interest in prayer. If we’re honest, that’s the question we want answered when we read books on prayer, listen to a message or podcast on prayer, or talk to people known as prayer warriors.

Recently there have been two high-profile stories involving prayer in the evangelical world. In December 2019, the two-year-old daughter of a worship leader at Bethel Church in Redding, California, suddenly died. When her body was taken to the morgue, the little girl’s mother at the church known for signs and wonders and strange phenomena such as “gold dust” and feathers floating down from the ceiling posted a message on social media, asking believers to pray that little Olive would rise from the dead:

“We are asking for bold, unified prayers from the global church to stand with us in belief that He will raise this little girl back to life. Her time here is not done, and it is our time to believe boldly, and with confidence wield what King Jesus paid for. It’s time for her to come to life.”

The hashtag #wakeupolive swept through the internet, with many people declaring a resurrection for Olive in Jesus’ name. There was a lot of the name-it-and-claim-it theology driving well-meaning people to declare what they were in reality demanding that God do. Some were saying that God’s name and character would be in question if He didn’t do what they wanted. Some were saying that God’s name and character would be in question if He didn’t come through.

When some people expressed their concern that God might not do what people “declared” that He would—when they stated the truth that God is sovereign and He does what is best—they were shamed for their unbelief. As the wise ladies of Mama Bear Apologetics analyzed this criticism, “If you doubt that He will, that is equivalent to doubting that He can.”

A LOT of people jumped on the #wakeupolive bandwagon, trusting that the strength and passion of their declarations would be sufficient to make God do what they wanted, as if His answer to prayer were contingent on how much emotional energy they could summon. When this happens, people are putting their faith in faith rather than God, who knows the whole big picture and always does the best, right thing. This is how they are trying to get God to do what they want.

This name-it-and-claim-it faith also warns against doubt, assuring people that if God doesn’t do what they are praying for, it’s because they didn’t have enough faith. Leaving any sort of open door for God to do His will independent of what is being asked is seen as doubting. When our premature baby died after nine days of faith-filled prayers, and many declarations of health and strength for her, we were told that we didn’t have enough faith. It was our fault.

When a lady in our Sunday School class battled cancer, she was so determined not to let doubt poison her declarations of healing that she stubbornly refused to discuss her funeral or how her house (and her many cats) should be disposed of if she didn’t get her miracle healing. It was a very sad thing to have to make these decisions for her when she died. She didn’t get what she wanted from God. In reality, she got something much better, but she would not allow for that possibility.

Little Olive did not rise from the dead.

People did not get what they were praying for, what they were declaring God would do.
That happens. A lot.

There was another request for prayer from believers when Lois Evans, the wife of pastor Dr. Tony Evans in Dallas, the mother of several amazing children including Priscilla Shirer, got to the end of her battle with cancer. Dr. Evans wrote,

> Yet, even though chemotherapy and radiation are no longer options, we still have total confidence in our God’s ability to supernaturally intervene and do what man is unable to do. Our prayers are full of faith, hope and expectancy. We would appreciate you praying with that same spirit. . . .

> We know God is still on the throne, and our faith is in Him and in His Word, and His love for us has not wavered in the least.

There is a huge difference between making a declaration, “standing in belief” for what people wanted, and this humble request for supernatural intervention that is still full of trust in God’s sovereignty and goodness.

God chose to bring Lois home, and her family responded with a stunning beauty in their trust in a good God even as they deeply grieved. Her memorial service was phenomenal.

In his eulogy, her son Jonathan said in this scripture-studded message:

> I was wrestling with God because I said, “If we have victory in Your name, didn’t You hear us when we were praying? Didn’t You see the cancer? ... Didn’t You hear us? Why didn’t You do what we were asking of You?"

> “Because your Word says, ‘If we abide in You and Your Word abides in us we can ask whatever we will and it will be given to us’? Your Word tells us that if we ask according to Your will that You hear us.

> “Your Word is telling us in Mark 11 that ‘if you pray believing you will receive.’ ‘To be anxious for nothing, but through prayer and supplication make your request known.’ Where are You?”

I was wrestling with God the last few days because “this was a great opportunity that we can tangibly see Your glory.

> “Everybody was praying, not only in Dallas, but around the country and around the world. People were watching. Where are You? This was an opportunity to see Your glory.”

And as I was wrestling with God, He answered. And He said, “Number 1, You don’t understand the nature of My victory because just because I didn’t answer your prayer your way doesn’t mean that I haven’t already answered your prayer anyway.

> “Because victory was already given to your mom. You don’t understand because of the victory that I have given you.

> “There was always only two answers to your prayers—either she was going to be healed or she was going to be healed.

> “Either she was going to live or she was going to live. Either she was going to be with family or she was going to be with family.
“Either she was going to be well taken care of or she was going to be well taken care of. Victory belongs to Me because of what I’ve already done for you.

“The two answers to your prayer are yes and yes. Because victory belongs to Jesus.”

Then He said to me, “You need to understand that I am God and I am sovereign. And My game plan is bigger than any one player on the field.

“So you need to trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on you, but lean on Me because I have the ability to make this crooked situation straight. I am the sovereign God. That’s why they say that I am that I am.

“As higher as the heavens are above the earth are My ways from your ways and My thoughts from your thoughts. We don’t think the same. P.S. Don’t tell me how to get my glory.”

And finally He just let me know, ’I appreciate your prayers and your trust in Me, but the way that you are coming to Me now is a sense of entitlement like I owe you something.

“You can’t tell me what I’m supposed to do. I’m God. You can’t say, ‘Well it should’ve been this way.’

“You can’t tell me, ‘Well as much as she served you, You should’ve done it this way. As much as my dad has done in ministry and as much as we’ve done in ministry and how faithful this family is, it should be this way.’

“Don’t come to me with that entitlement. Because without My victory and what I have done all of You would be on the doorsteps of hell.

“I don’t owe you anything. You owe me everything.

“And I know that it was hard for you to sit there and watch your mom die, but don’t let that belittle the fact of how hard it was for Me to watch my Son die so she could live. So back up off Me with your entitlement.

“There were always two answers to your question—yes and yes—because of My grace being sufficient.”

Thank You Lord.

The prayers of many people in both situations were not answered with the “yes” that so many wanted, but they were answered with the "something better" that God can know because He is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and sovereign (in control)

How can we make God answer our prayers the way we want?

We can’t.

We don’t have that kind of power or influence.

It’s the wrong way to look at prayer.

The right way is always to follow the way Jesus modeled for us the night before He died, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He asked for what He wanted—so passionately that He literally sweat blood about it—and then relinquished His request into His Father’s loving hand: “Not My will, but Thine be
As wise people have observed, if we could see everything God sees, and know everything God knows, we would ask Him for exactly what He allows and what He does.

It’s about trust in a good God, not declarations about us.


### Instead of New Year’s Resolutions

Fill in the blank: New Year’s ________.

You probably either supplied “Eve” or “Resolutions,” right?

Resolutions are intentions that may last days or weeks, but so often they peter out before we even get used to using the new year in our dates. May I suggest that instead of forming resolutions, we spend time asking some powerfully insightful questions that will help us evaluate ourselves truthfully and helpfully?

Here are three questions that many community/accountability groups ask each other regularly (as in, weekly):

**What am I doing to feed myself (spiritually)?** How am I spending time in God’s word and other sources of spiritual truth and wisdom such as books?

**What am I doing to feed my flesh?** How am I indulging my appetites and desires in ways that glorify myself instead of God?

**What am I doing to feed others?** How am I pointing others to Christ and helping them grow spiritually?

My pastor at Watermark Community Church-Plano, Kyle Kaigler, is especially good at pointed questions. Every morning, as he thinks back on the previous day, he examines himself in four areas:

**Where was I hooked?** (caught in a bad habit that controls me)

**Where was I cold?** (being so self-focused that I failed to be loving and kind to those around me)

**Where was I scared?** (allowing my fear of man to keep me from saying and doing the things I should be)
Where was I proud? (taking credit for what God did)

(Pastor Tim Keller asks these same questions: https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/help-with-prayer-simple-clear-gospel-devotion-from-tim-keller/)

Kyle also offers these questions:

John Piper says that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” So, looking back over the last 12 months:

What are the most God-glorifying occasions over this past year that came from finding satisfaction in Him? When was I moved to erupt in gratitude and praise for what God did in my life? Were there sweet moments of deep connection with others, or a “lightbulb moment” when He revealed truth to me in a way that zapped lies and wrong beliefs? Were there moments of realizing I was just immersed in His goodness?

What was a distraction to the glory of God? In what areas of my life is my stubborn affinity for my flesh, getting my way, insisting on staying in my comfort zone, serving like mud that covers up “Christ in me, the hope of glory”? Where did my entrenched habits (such as continually checking my phone) function like a stop sign, keeping God at a distance? How have I tuned Him out so that I miss the ways He wants to nudge me, direct me, lead me through the day?

Here are some helpful spiritual assessment questions:

What has God been teaching me in His word? We should be recording the things the Holy Spirit is showing us in our time in His word so we can remind ourselves of His lessons and insights. Otherwise we are the guy from James 1 who looks in a mirror and then turns away, thoughtlessly unaware of what he looks like.

How’s my time with the Lord?

a. Consistent and meaningful (It’s ok to choose this option)
b. Consistent but not so meaningful (I am faithful to go before the Lord but I leave the time unfulfilled)
c. Inconsistent but meaningful (I don’t do it very often but when I do, He is faithful to meet me there)
d. Inconsistent and not meaningful (it’s just not happening)

(If a or c) How is God transforming my life? What is God revealing about Himself and His desire for my life? How is my heart being changed to more faithfully follow where He is leading? What have I surrendered (or still working on surrendering) to Jesus’ control? How is my life changing so He is increasing, and I am decreasing?

(If b or d) What are the barriers to consistent and meaningful time with God? (Busyness, worldliness, selfishness, sin—lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, sinful pride of life)

Am I sharing my story of how Jesus Christ changed my life?

Am I being a good steward of the body God gave me?

Am I being a good steward of the resources He has given me?

And finally, again thanks to Kyle, here are some interesting survey questions for family members:
Spouse survey

1. What were the best memories that we made together this year as a couple?
2. What were the best memories that we made together this year as a family?
3. What would you consider the key challenges we faced as a family this past year? What about in our marriage?
4. If someone were to ask you, “Describe your current marriage relationship.” What would you say and why?
5. If you could change anything about last year, what would it be and why?
6. Based on the experiences that we have had as a couple and as a family, what have you learned about God and His work in our lives?
7. What are 3 trips or activities that you would enjoy doing together this next year?
8. What do I do that really ministers to you and you would love it if I did it more?
9. What are your top fears/concerns for each of our children?

Kid Survey

1. What have been some of the best times you have had with me this past year?
2. If you had to give me some advice on being a better parent, what would it be and why?
3. What are some things that you would like to talk with me about and why?
4. What are some of your fears that you would like me to pray for you about?
5. What is something that you would like to do with me?
6. How can I help you grow as a Christian?
7. As you consider conversations and time together as a family over the past year, what new things have you learned or understood more about God?

I think these powerful questions, answered thoughtfully and truthfully, will serve us better than any New Years Resolution we’ve ever made.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/instead-of-new-years-resolutions/ on December 31, 2019.

What Does Trusting God Look Like?

When friends are frozen by fear and anxiety, I often suggest they recite Psalm 56:3 over and over: “When I am afraid, I will trust in You.”

But what does it mean to trust God? What does it look like in real life? How do we understand how to trust Him?

I recently asked this question on Facebook and was deeply blessed by the wisdom and experience of friends who have learned how to trust God in the refining fires of life in a fallen world.

One scripture reference was cited again and again, probably the best go-to verse on trusting God,
Proverbs 3:5-6:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will direct your paths.

Verse 3 is a parallelism, a Hebrew form of idea rhyming, where two ideas are complementary sides of the same coin, so to speak. Trusting in the Lord with all your heart means not leaning on our own understanding. If we’re not leaning on our own understanding, that means leaning on God’s understanding—and His character, and His goodness, and His love. Acknowledging Him in all our ways means continually orienting ourselves toward Him the way a plant turns to the light. And choosing, DELIBERATELY choosing, to refuse to lean on our own understanding, leaning hard into Him instead.

So trust is a kind of leaning, transferring our weight onto someone or something else.

I get leaning.

30 years ago I started using a cane because my weak polio leg was only going to get weaker. It was amazing how much more instant stability I had. Which is what happens when we lean on God.

So trusting means CHOOSING.

We make one initial choice to lean into God instead of ourselves, especially when life doesn’t make sense, and then we continue to practice making that choice over and over.

I think there are three aspects of trusting God: Making the initial choice to trust Him, reminding ourselves of what is true, and continuing to choose to trust.

Choosing to Trust

Trust starts with a definitive, intentional decision to “step over the line” by turning from doing things our way, trusting in ourselves and our own understanding, to transfer our dependence to God. Here’s a word of wisdom concerning not relying on ourselves and our own understanding [read: manipulating]: “Trust is living without scheming.”

One wise friend shared, “Trust is the expectation of good based on the character of God. I remind myself in the middle of the muddle: ‘This story is not over yet.’”

Have you ever seen scared little children pressing hard into their parents? It’s what they do to their mommies and daddies because it’s the nature of emotionally healthy children to trust their parents, especially when they’re scared.

Pressing hard is a picture of trust.

Trusting happens when we realize, “I am not in control. I release my illusion of control and give the reins over to the Lord.”

One friend wrote, “There’s usually a point where you have to admit you no longer have the reins. For me, I can recall specific instances where I have said, ‘Lord, whatever will bring You the most glory . . . [do it.]’ It’s like something in the spiritual realm is released when we allow God to be God in our lives.”
I love that she used the word “released.” That is such a powerful concept. I’m taken to Matthew 11:28-30—“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Releasing the weariness and burden of trying to run our own lives in our own strength onto Jesus is how we enter His rest, which we only get on the other side of trusting.

Along the same lines, trusting God looks like relinquishing worries and anxieties, rolling them over into Jesus’ more-than-capable hands, and then choosing to leave them there. (“No, I’m not going to worry about that, I gave it to Jesus on Tuesday at 3:14 p.m.”)

One of my fellow Bible study leaders shared this gem:

“I learned to swing dance about a year before becoming a believer and one of the ways my partner and I would practice was for me to be blindfolded. I had a tendency to anticipate the moves that he would lead as opposed to letting him lead me and I was unintentionally hijacking his lead—very often. The blindfold made me wait, listen, and not anticipate. He was able to lead me through combinations I would have never been able to imagine (he was a much more experienced dancer than me). In my early walk, as I disciplined myself to walk with the Lord, I would reflect on my experience with dancing blindfolded and it gave me great courage to trust Him through things unseen.”

So trusting means choosing with the heart and mind, “I will follow YOU, Lord!”

One more picture of what trusting God looks like. Several friends responding to my Facebook post invoked the idea of clinging to Him, “even when it’s scary and life doesn’t appear to make sense. Knowing that, even in the hard times, He is working to perfect us, to grow us, to give us hope, and to bring glory, through us, to Himself. It means the assurance that He has the big picture of His plan in sight and everything He allows/ordains for me is a piece of that.”

Maybe nobody understands the concept of “clinging” like the tourist who discovered his harness wasn’t attached to the frame of his hang glider. He literally had to hang on to the frame for dear life for his harrowing two-minute flight.

What a picture of trust as clinging!

Trust is a lovely “holy stubbornness” in clinging to God’s goodness and sovereignty no matter how we feel, just as the hang glider stubbornly clung to the frame of his glider.

Reminding Ourselves of What is True
Once we’ve made the choice to trust God, we need to keep on trusting. The way we build our trust is to remind ourselves, over and over and over, of trustworthy truths about God:

• God is good.
• He will never leave us.
• He loves us.
• He is in control.
• He never makes mistakes.
• He can be trusted.

The continual process of trusting God is not only speaking the truth to ourselves, but reminding ourselves of His faithfulness in the past. That’s why it’s good to keep a journal—one friend keeps what she calls her “brag book” about God. I call mine a “God Sightings Book.” We can also build an “altar” (something physical that serves as a reminder of what God did, such as planting a tree).

I love what one friend said: “Trusting God means that I actively, willfully refuse to worry and instead I fix my gaze on Christ and recite to myself Who Scripture reveals Him to be, His promises, and everything He has already done.”

Another friend has been faithfully slogging through a long period of not seeing what God is doing: “Trusting God means trying to keep a posture of ‘open hands, eyes up’ and a curiosity that has us constantly wondering aloud, ‘What are you up to, God? We can’t wait to see.’”

I love how she and her husband live out their trust: OK, Lord, we can trust You or we can freak out and make things happen on our own. That would be stupid. So let’s go back to thanking You for the details of how You are proving Yourself faithful day after day. We trust You by NOT taking matters into our own hands. We trust You by continuing to wait.

Another friend drew on two different ways for her husband and her to make it through a particularly tough challenge: “One was to say out loud and mean it: ‘Lord, we choose to trust in You through this.’” They would also repeat 2 Chronicles 20:12—“Lord, we don’t know what to do, but our eyes are on You.”

** Continuing to Choose to Trust **

So trust starts out as a choice to lean into God instead of ourselves, and it continues as we remind ourselves of WHAT is true, and that HE is true.

But trust sinks its roots down deep into our hearts and souls as we continue to choose dependence on the Lord instead of ourselves. There has to be an “on-goingness” to real trust, because it’s not a one-time decision, but an ongoing position built by continual choices to keep on trusting.

One mama friend was shocked and rocked to learn her baby would be born with Down Syndrome. She wrote,

“Since having [my daughter], God has grown my trust in Him immensely. For me, trusting God means to really know His heart, His goodness, His love for me and my children, and knowing He has a perfect plan . . . even when He doesn’t swoop in and make things easier. Trusting God is a daily relationship talking, listening, and praying with Him. Even when circumstances don’t change and life is and will be difficult. Even when you see your child suffer—trusting Him looks like having an eternal focus, not an earthly one.

“Trusting Him looks like your 6-month old having heart surgery and meditating on worship music to
remind you of His goodness and love. It’s choosing him over and over again no matter if His plan aligns with yours.”

I responded to her, “My takeaway from your absolutely precious post is that trust can look like a kind of ‘holy stubbornness’ of choosing, over and over, to lash ourselves to a good and loving God who has proven His faithfulness over and over. Despite circumstances which only tend to obscure, not define, ultimate reality.” I love to see evidences of that “holy stubbornness” in people!

Another friend pointed out that wavering trust can mean going off-track into the weeds of feelings. (Which are valuable as indicators of what’s going on in our hearts, but are terrible indicators of truth! Feelings are like the warning lights on the dashboards of our cars, but they make awful compasses…)

“When my trust in God wavers even the least little bit, I have a tendency to lean toward my emotions. Not that emotions aren’t valid and valuable, but when they begin to lead my thoughts, it can throw everything haywire. I start believing lies. The only antidote is seeking and speaking His Truth over every feeling—I suppose it’s what the Scripture calls “taking every thought captive.” I love the vivid language there: I can picture this tall strong person (the statement of Truth) coming up to one of my gone-wild feelings with a pair of handcuffs and shouting, ‘You’re under arrest!’ I’m a visual person and sometimes this is what grappling in prayer looks like for me.”

There is no passivity in trusting God. It’s a very active way of choosing to think and remember and maintain our position of dependence on Him. In the book Surrender to Love, David Benner writes about teaching a group of non-swimmers how to snorkel. Because they had learned to trust him as a spiritual teacher, and they had learned the spiritual principle of surrender, they were willing to enter the water and let go of the side of the boat. They trusted him when he told them they would float. They trusted him when he told them they could breathe through the snorkel without having to lift their heads out of the water.

Trusting God is like getting out of the boat, donning the snorkel, and trusting that the water will hold you up while you breathe with your face in the water.

It’s leaning,

It’s clinging.

It’s releasing and relinquishing into God’s hands.

And, at its core, trusting God is saying, “Thy will be done.” Enjoy.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_does_trusting_god_look_like on November 19, 2019.
Sanctification From a Home Improvement Project

The process of upgrading and repairing Byron Barlowe’s home helped him to see how God does the same kind of transformation in the souls of Christ-followers.

My wife and I are living in a suspended state of misery in our own home. It’s like camping in a plastic-lined dustbin after a tornado blew furniture and books into random piles. Hidden in every crevice there’s a thin fog of whitish dust and snow that won’t melt. “How long, O Lord?” This odyssey started as we launched a long-awaited kitchen remodel, which would be stress enough: “Where’s that sink they took out with the bulk waste—we need it back until the granite people come to install the new one!” Camping indoors again.

But then we succumbed to the contractor’s compelling sell-job on removing popcorn from our ceilings—you know, that lumpy stuff hanging from 20th century ceilings. “They’ll get it done and clean it up for you.” No sweat, right? Right!

Anyone who’s lived through a major renovation or addition can testify to the disturbance. It’s an all-encompassing project. “How many more trips to Home Depot?” I’m at the library writing this and will head to the shower at the YMCA. The paint makes it hard to sleep. Finally, we left for vacation. Disruption of routines and an exploded sense of place overwhelms and badgers us.

Yet God is in it. The ordeal is bringing out loads of attitudes and frustrations in me, especially since God seems to be doing an attitude renovation within me simultaneously. Is that dual lesson cruel of God, or spiritually strategic? Do I really grow when things sail smoothly along?

Yes, the promise of a new look and feel gets lost in the temporary tiresomeness of it all. The more you have, the more you pay in so many ways! Yet, what we had was not up to grade. Some of it was poised to cause disaster, like some plumbing in our kitchen. Replacing the working fridge with a cooler one (accidental pun) revealed a faulty valve. It had to be replaced. In the same way, my soul needs a makeover.

Like a master plumber, the Lord needs to hook up the new pipes of grace he has for me. He’s renovating my heart. I need to grow into the new creation I already am. New openings for new blessings, old things made new. Getting hung up on my way of seeing issues or settling for an inadequate view of God’s goodness calls for a major overhaul. The Lord is committed to make this happen as I somewhat grudgingly lay my life before him in submission—again. It hurts and is a mess, like the unexpected plumbing issue. But like the fridge fix, it makes possible a bounty of unspoiled fruit and prevents a nasty flood!

Back to the originally intended project: the process for the ceiling redux is a multi-step process. It requires the following:

- **scraping**: complete with the roar of compressor to spray water, a sharp scraper, and the old junk that falls to floor (and into everything) like oatmeal or, well, wet popcorn

- **“mud”** to fill holes and fix gouges, a lot like grout for tile or what painters do with picture hanger holes

- **texture** for a new, updated look, smoother than the stuff from the days of puffy hairdos and
• And paint to “top” it off and complete the enjoyable and more livable change.

Simple processes aside, the disarray and disruption of either kind of renovation cannot be overstated. Every last physical item, habit, and way of life has been overturned, from sleeping to showering, eating to breathing itself. Repeat after me, self: temporary pain for years of gain. And isn’t that what spiritual growth is like? Is it worth it? This is the operative question each time the Lord convicts us of sin or a character issue. Sanctification—the project of turning us into the real likeness of Christ—promises eternal reward and glory! It showcases the goodness and truth of God. Maturity matters, even though its development stinks at efficiency and convenience from a human perspective.

Because negative thought patterns burn into our minds and even have bodily effects, they need to be peeled off, removed. Kind of like the dragon skin of the character Eustace, the unbearably cynical and snooty boy character in C.S. Lewis’s Voyage of the Dawn Treader. His spiritual blindness and insensitivity had to go but was painful to remove. Sin sticks and separates us from God, goodness and others. Due to its toxic spiritual effects, transformation can’t be kept waiting. We, like young Eustace, need to release our sense of entitlement and thanklessness, rid ourselves of a false sense of pleasure and pride. He have to grow new skin. We too must be scraped over, repaired, remade and painted afresh.

What does this spiritual scraping of sanctification look like in more detail? Well, not unlike ceiling refurbishment in so many ways.

**Necessary Disruption**

First, like those old popcorn ceilings, coverings in my soul simply must be replaced, and not for reasons of fashion. Scraping ceilings and hearts is inconvenient—the workers are in our house all day. The Lord does his work while we do our lives. There is never a “good time” for it. You just have to suck it up and have your life turned around a bit. I have been forced, in no small part by dealing with contractors and suppliers, to wrestle down thoughts like, “People are clueless—I wish they’d smarten up and pay attention.” While there is truth behind those convictions as we all know, people have reasons for distraction and the unredeemed have no choice but to be self-centered and confused. The Lord has been revealing what it means to “value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). When my protective and cynical dragon skin layers are removed, I begin to appreciate how gentle and ordered others’ minds can be. Their skills and especially their ability to roll with messy, changeable situations amazes me. They are better than me at a lot of things. Regardless of my perceptions, God sees them as priceless and since he loves me supremely, so I can afford to regard them as more important than myself.

**Healing Takes Time, Repetition**

Second, filling in the holes and cracks means going over the same “ground” again. It’s detailed work and has to set up and dry before you can move on. This does not feel efficient, yet it ensures that things are permanently restored. Often, the soulish equivalent of this comes in the form of deep fellowship and counseling—filling in the injury done to our souls with solid truth and love. The old becomes new again, the cracked smooth, the damaged healed. “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:12).
The Grace of Preparation and Protection

In fact, prepping the house took the most time: taping plastic to the floor, draping furniture and ceiling fans, disconnecting light fixtures and removing air vents. It’s as if the protection of our belongings and dwelling takes precedence over the new look and underlying stuff. Isn’t this God’s way? As his Spirit renovates our lives, he lines us with protective layers of grace and love, draping us with the encouragement of prayers he evokes on our behalf and the love of fellow Christ-followers.

Renovation Takes Force

Third, just like ceiling overhauls, retexturing is yet another wearying pass over the same square footage for the purpose of renewal—and it has to be forced. Workers hold a little orange plastic tank attached to a hose that’s hooked up to a compressor, then spray the new coating on the freshly prepared surface. The pneumatic motor kicks into a whining screech that fills the house. Without that push, the spray can’t come out of the nozzle ten feet in the air. Similarly, the Spirit’s regeneration of our souls is noisy, messy, pushy and downright unpleasant. We may tire of reaching up to do our part in spreading newness onto the same surface from which God has removed the old stuff. Our shoulders and hearts get exhausted, sore from holding up our part of the work. The air is a bit nasty to breathe. But if our new life is to be realized, it has to be done, forcibly.

The Stuff of Spiritual Renovation

Just what is such spiritual newness? The material used is God’s Word illumined by his Spirit, creating new pathways for our minds, hearts and wills, right down to the bone and marrow of our beliefs. It means filling our minds with “whatever is true . . . honorable . . . right, . . . pure . . . lovely . . . of good repute . . . any excellence [and] anything worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8), being “transformed” and “renewed” in our minds (Romans 12:1-2), reckoning (deciding to be so) ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). All of these fresh Spirit-pumped coatings can cover our internal overheads with new, living realities. That is, thinking and believing in a life-giving outlook that takes seriously the promise that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) is the ultimate renewal. Now, the house has a new sky, if you will, and the sun is ready to shine a bit brighter. As we capitulate to the often onerous process of scraping, mudding, and texturing, we experience a brand new covering for ceilings and souls-in-Christ. And now for the coup de grace!

New Paint, New Spiritual Robes

Painting is the final stage of this household transformation. Gone are the ugly, useless bits, replaced with the smoothness of shalom—peace-filled blessedness—where defects get filled in and fixed as we submit to the work. Likewise, as we are molded into Christ’s likeness, we put on robes of pure white righteousness (Revelation 19:8; 3:4). So much can be said about the glory of holiness produced in willing saints. Suffice to say that the glory that awaits us outshines even the brightest hues applied to earthly surfaces. Our spiritual man is growing brighter, even as our bodies break down and fade. “We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Many of us have ceilings that overhang us with old, outdated looks. All believers in Christ have rooms—perhaps whole houses—that need reworking. Let the scraping begin. It’s worth it!
How to Kill Sin: John Owen’s The Mortification of Sin

Paul Rutherford provides an overview of the Puritan John Owen’s classic book The Mortification of Sin.

Introduction

In my early twenties I confessed to a friend an ongoing battle with sin. He suggested I read John Owen’s book, The Mortification of Sin{1}. I wish I had read it back then. It would have saved me so much pain in my battle against sin.

So I want to help you in that same way by sharing some of Owen’s key insights in the battle against sin.

Let’s begin with the title. Mortification, what does that word mean? Broadly speaking, it means to kill or put to death. The Latin root from which this English word is derived, “mort-“ or “mors” means death. Mortificare—to kill.{2} Other examples of this root include mortuary, mortician, and mortgage.

Simply put, mortification means death, but note the dictionary also lists “shame” and “humiliation” as definitions as well. So mortification involves death. More to the point, Owen wants you to kill sin. More importantly, he makes a case that Scripture commands you to kill sin.

This message today is not for everyone. It’s only appropriate if you believe in Jesus. Early in the work Owen gravely warns those who would mortify sin, but do so without first believing in Jesus.

I would warn you as well. Please don’t sit here and read another minute if you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ for your righteousness, for your salvation. If you’re reading this right now and have never made a confession of faith, and you’re ready, please do so now. Just talk to God and tell him you believe that Jesus is Lord, that He died for your sins, was buried, and raised from the dead, and you are putting your trust in Him. Then tell someone you know who already believes. It will be the most important thing you do, ever.

If you’re still reading, then let’s press on. Owen discusses at length what it means to kill sin, how to do it effectively, and why you should do it.

But before we jump in, remember John Owen was a 17th century English pastor and theologian. This is not his first book, and at the time he composed it, he was Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford. Owen has academic credentials. But this book is more devotional than academic. Owen draws from personal experience. It is not merely intellectual. He meant for it to be practiced.
What is Mortification?

John Owen wrote *The Mortification of Sin* in England in 1656. Mortification means death, or in this case to kill…sin. That’s what we covered in the previous section. This matters because your life is at stake here. In chapter two, Owen warns us with this now famous quote, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” That is probably the most famous quote from that book.

Did you catch the significance of that quote? Sin will kill you. That’s why this is a big deal. That’s why this matters. That’s also why sin’s presence requires such a drastic response. It must be killed. James tells us that “[S]in when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

Your best option—the most effective option—your only real option is to *kill* sin. Just like John Owen said. Kill it. Or it will kill you. Because trust me. It will kill you—in every way: physically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually—every way.

Owen quickly reminds us this is impossible in a complete, ultimate, or perfect sense, until Jesus comes back, not before. So until then we mortify sin.

Now let’s talk about mortification. Let’s talk about killing sin. What exactly does that mean? Sin is an abstract thing, not a biological organism. How do you kill an abstract thing? Owen’s instruction is clear: “utterly destroy it” or, make it cease to be.

Owen defines the process of mortification three ways: sin gets weaker, you fight against it constantly, and you have full success over it.

So then mortification means to weaken sin, or drain it of its power. It means the desire to sin decreases in degree, frequency, and quality. That comes as you “crucify the flesh with its passions and desires,” as we read in Galatians 5:24.

Mortification also means to fight sin constantly. You have an enemy. Employ any means necessary to destroy his work. The contest will be vigorous and hazardous.

Finally, mortification is success against sin in any given moment. This isn’t merely resisting temptation. Owen has more in view here; it is recognizing temptation, bringing it before Christ, pursuing sin to its root, and conquering it in Jesus’ strength.

Before we discuss how to do this, for clarity let’s talk about how not to mortify sin.

**How NOT to Mortify Sin**

Mortification means to kill, and the point of John Owen’s book *The Mortification of Sin* is to kill sin. Nothing short of your life is at stake here since sin always leads to death.

Sin is not to be trifled with. It cost Jesus His life.

Owen himself covers what mortification is NOT in the book, before he defines what it is. So now we will follow his lead.

Mortification is commonly mistaken. It is tricky to identify properly. Four things frequently masquerade as mortification, when they are in fact not. These four are: faking it, having a calm disposition, cross-addiction, and behavior modification.
Faking it, the first instance of false mortification, is making yourself look good on the outside, instances where outward signs of sin are obvious—compulsive spending, for example. You may choose not to buy something the next time you’re tempted, but that outward choice is not the root of sin. The root is inside. It goes deeper.

The root is the belief that material will fill that void inside. Owen further points out hypocrisy as a real danger here. Not only did you not mortify the sin, you are now making it look as if you have.

Mortification is also not simply a calm disposition. Some sins are obvious, visible, even violent in nature. In these cases if you become more calm, more quiet, more gentle, it could appear on the outside as if the sin is gone. In fact it is not. Owen reminds us that mortification is more than a simple change in disposition.

Mortification is also not replacing one vice for another. For example, if the presenting sin is addiction to pornography, keeping yourself from erotic material may appear as victory unless you pick up the bottle. Now you simply exchanged pornography for alcohol. You exhibit a cross-addiction. This, too, is not mortification.

Mortification is also not mere change in behavior. Surely you have made a big change before—created a new habit, lost weight, something, even a New Year’s resolution. You can force the behavior for a while—maybe even through February! You can make yourself do what you’ve resolved. But eventually, that old habit creeps back; unless some real changes are made, it’s merely a shift in behavior. This also is not mortification.

What is mortification, then? How do you do it?

**How to Mortify Sin**

After all this preliminary discussion, you probably want to know how you can kill sin, conquer it, and be victorious, because if you don’t it will kill you, as Owen himself says in the book.

Here’s the bad news, though. You can’t mortify your sin. You will have no victory over sin by employing any method I recommend to you. Now, don’t despair! This doesn’t mean you can’t experience victory! God forbid. Rather, it is God’s will for you to find victory over the curse of sin. What I mean here is that mortification is not something you do. It is instead something God does, namely the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can mortify sin, kill sin in the flesh. Only He is strong enough to put to death the old man.

So what do you do, then? Here are Owen’s words. “Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror. Yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet.”

The way to mortify sin is to set faith at work. Put your faith to work. Believe in the work Jesus did on the cross. His sacrifice is your remedy. That’s how you kill sin—you don’t. You believe in the power of Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross, and let Christ kill it for you.

It’s freeing really. Would you want the responsibility of killing the broken flesh within you? I don’t. Owen goes on to add two more points of substance. First “fill your soul” with the provision of Christ. I might call that meditation. Meditate on Christ. Fill your mind with His provision.
The second point is to expect relief in Christ. Owen reasons that if Christ’s blood is enough to make you righteous—and if the Spirit is strong enough to mortify your flesh, then expect it’s going to happen. It may not be instantaneous. Anyone who’s been walking with Christ for some time will affirm this. It’s a slow and difficult, often painful process, but definitely a good one.

So that is how you mortify sin. You don’t. You let the Spirit do it. Your job is to believe by faith.

**Conclusion**

What have we learned so far? If you are following in the footsteps of Jesus, you need to mortify, or put to death, sin in your life. If you don’t it will kill you.

This is not a popular message. I admit. Sin is not a fun topic. But Scripture is clear. Sin must be put to death. Owen’s book, while dating over three hundred years back, could be neither more timely nor more appropriate for you today.

Owen admonishes the sincere believer to kill indwelling sin without delay. He warns the unbeliever this is impossible without Jesus Christ. Jesus is absolutely essential to the success and continued process of mortification. To do otherwise is the “soul and substance of all false religion in the world.”

If you believe in Jesus and you are stuck in your sin, maybe you’re trapped in addiction, this book is for you. Mortify sin.

“Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin.” You believe in His Son for salvation. Believe Him now for the deliverance of your soul from the power of indwelling sin.

It is not easy. You will struggle every day against sin. The bad news here is that you carry the problem with you. Your flesh is broken. It remains unregenerate until the day of Christ. Your soul is secure eternally by the blood of Christ, and one day you will receive a gloriously new body. But for now, we struggle.

But consider Jesus’ promise in that struggle: “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”

Mortification is not for the faint of heart. But it is good. Your sin does not define you. God does. And he says you are fearfully and wonderfully made. He paid the price of your sin. It was an awful lot. But he loves you that much.

Trust him today. Trust in his Word. And trust in the community of saints He provided for you. Confess your sin to them today. Do you want to fully live? Then kill sin.

**Notes**

4. 1 Corinthians 15:50-54.
5. Colossians 3:5.
6. Owen, p.64.
7. James 1:15; Proverbs 14:12; Genesis 2:17.
Spiritual Warfare - Applying A Biblical Worldview Perspective

Kerby Anderson provides a concise, biblical worldview perspective on the important topic of spiritual warfare. Every Christian needs to understand that our battle is against spiritual forces not against other humans, who need Christ. He gives us practical advice on understanding our spiritual weapons and applying them to take on the forces of Satan in this world.

Spiritual Warfare

Lots of books have been written about spiritual warfare. Most of them share anecdotes and experiences of the authors or the people they to whom they have ministered. In this article I merely want to answer the question, what is a biblical point of view on spiritual warfare? (For more information on this topic, see Kerby Anderson, A Biblical Point of View on Spiritual Warfare (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009).

Spiritual warfare affects everyone. In fact, the day someone becomes a Christian, they are already involved in spiritual warfare. There is no place you can escape from this warfare. There are no “safe zones” or “secure bunkers” where you can hide.

Sadly, many Christians do not even know there is a spiritual war taking place around them. They
may even become a spiritual casualty and never understand what has happened to them.

So many Christians have become mortally wounded in the spiritual conflict that takes place around them. They may be so emotionally spent or spiritually dead that they are essentially no longer of any use to God.

Others may have less serious wounds from this spiritual conflict, but are still affected by the battle. They still go about the Christian life but are not as effective as they could be because of the “battle scars” they carry with them.

Jesus never promised that the Christian life would be easy. In fact, He actually warned us of the opposite. He says in John 16:33 that “in this world you will have trouble.”

Anyone who takes even a brief look at the history of Christianity knows that is true. Jesus was beaten and crucified. Most of the disciples died martyrs deaths. Millions of Christians were persecuted throughout history.

Christians today suffer persecution in many lands, and all of us wake up to a spiritual battle every day. That is why we need to be prepared for battle.

So where does this battle take place? Actually the Bible teaches that spiritual warfare takes place in various places in heaven and on earth.

First, we should remember that God dwells above in the heavens. Psalm 8:1 says that God has displayed His splendor above the heavens. Psalm 108:4-5 says God’s lovingkindness is great above the heavens and that He is exalted above the heavens.

The Bible also talks about the battle in the heavens. When a passage in Scripture talks about heaven, it may be referring to one of three places: (1) The first heaven is what we would call the atmosphere, (2) The second heaven is where the angels fly and do battle (Revelation 12:4-12; 14:6-7), and (3) the third heaven is also called “Paradise” and is what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

Spiritual warfare also takes place below the heavens and on earth. This occurs on the face of the earth (Genesis 6:1; Acts 17:26) where Satan prowls like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). And it will also take place in hell and the bottomless pit (Revelation 9:1-2; 20:1-3) and at the Lake of Fire (Revelation 19:20; 20:10-15) where final judgment will take place.

**Spiritual Battles**

Spiritual warfare is the spiritual battle that takes place in the unseen, supernatural dimension. Although it is unseen by humans, we can certainly feel its effects. And we are to battle against spiritual forces in a number of ways.

First, we need to realize that the weapons of this warfare are not human weapons fought in the flesh. Instead, they are spiritual weapons such as truth and righteousness that can tear down strongholds and philosophies that are in opposition to God.
For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Second, the nature of this battle is different from an earthly battle. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul talks about the nature of this spiritual battle: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness of this world, against spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places.”

We can also have confidence because God “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13).

Many Christians do not like the warfare imagery in the Bible, but that is how the spiritual life is described. We need to prepare for this spiritual battle even if we would like to ignore the battle for truth and error as well as the battle for life and death that is taking place around us.

Third, the Bible tells us that to prepare for battle. We must wear the right armor and have the right weapons, which include truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, and prayer:

Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:14-18a).

The Bible also calls upon us to be strong in the Lord. We should be steadfast in our resistance to the Devil. We do this by putting on the whole armor of God and resisting Satan. Ephesians 6:10-11 says, “Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”

The Three Ws

One way to understand the nature of spiritual warfare is to consider the three Ws: our walk, our weapons, and our warfare.

First let’s consider our walk. Paul says, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:3). Our war is not an earthly one but a spiritual one. So even though we do walk in the flesh, our warfare is not fleshly.

We should understand that we didn’t start this war but it has been going on long before we came on the scene. For a war to exist, there must be threat from those intend to harm others.

For the battle to be successful, those who are threatened must be willing to stand up and fight. Many wars have been lost because good people refused to fight. And many Christians believe that the reason Satan has been so successful in the world is because either (1) Christians have been unwilling to fight, or (2) Christians have not even been aware that there is a spiritual battle.

The second W is our weapons. Paul also teaches, “for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Corinthians 10:4). One of the most
important weapons of our warfare is the Word of God. Paul calls it the “Sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17).

We are also instructed to wear armor before we go into battle (Ephesians 6). We are to gird our loins with truth (vs. 14a). That means we need to define the truth, defend the truth, and spread the truth. We are also to wear the breastplate of righteousness (vs. 14b). That means we are to rely on the righteousness of Jesus and live holy and righteous lives. We are also to take up the shield of faith (vs. 16). When we have bold faith, we are able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of Satan. And we are to take the helmet of salvation (vs. 17). We need to be assured of our salvation and stand firm in that assurance.

The third W is our warfare. What is the goal of spiritual warfare? Paul says, “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). We cannot fight this war with physical weapons because our targets are not physical. They are intellectual and spiritual. So we cannot fight them with guns or planes or bombs.

The word “speculations” (which is sometimes translated “imaginations”) refers to the mind. It includes our thoughts and our reflections. So we should challenge the false ideas that Satan has encouraged in the world by countering unbiblical speculations and proclaiming God’s truth.

The World, the Flesh, and the Devil

How does spiritual warfare affect us?

When the New Testament uses the term “world,” most of the time it is a translation from the word kosmos. Sometimes it can mean simply the planet earth (John 1:10; Acts 17:24). But when we talk about the influence of the world on our spiritual life and on our souls, we are talking about the worldly system in which we live. This world system involves culture and philosophy that is ultimately in opposition to God. That doesn’t mean that everyone is evil or that the world’s system is filled with nothing but error. But it does mean that the world can have a negative influence on our souls.

Paul warns not to be conformed to this world (Romans 12:1). He also warns us not to let our hearts and minds be taken captive to these false ideas: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

The Bible teaches that many temptations come from the world’s system. We read in 1 John 2:15-16, “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

The second influence is the flesh. Like our previous term, the word flesh can have different meanings. Sometimes it merely refers to our body: our flesh and bones (Luke 24:39; Acts 2:26). In this context, however, flesh is a second area of temptation and thus an important instrument of sin. We see this in the fact that we are born with a sin nature (Romans 7:14-24; 8:5-9). It is part of our bodies (Romans 7:25; 1 John 1:8-10) even after we have accepted Jesus Christ. But the good news is that its power over us has been broken (Romans 6:1-14) so that we can have victory over sin (Romans 8:1-4).

A third influence is the Devil. The ruler and mastermind behind the world’s system is Satan. He can
use the various distractions of the world’s system to draw us into sin, temptation, and worldliness. We read in 1 John 2:15 that “If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” So the Devil can use the world to turn our affections from God to the world.

Satan can also attack us through our flesh. He can entice our flesh with various temptations. We read in 1 John 2:16 that “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” He can draw our attention away from God by manipulating the desires of the flesh.

**Spiritual Weapons**

The weapons of our warfare are spiritual because the battle we are fighting is spiritual. Paul clearly states this in Ephesians 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” This is a spiritual battle that takes place in the heavenly places.

We should also realize that we are not warring against flesh and blood but against a spiritual enemy. So even though we might be tempted to think that people are our real enemy, our real enemy is Satan and his demons. People are merely pawns in the heavenly chess game being played out in our lives and in our world.

Paul tells us that “though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). So what are those weapons? It is interesting that Paul does not give a list to those who he is writing to in the church in Corinth. Therefore, we must assume that they were already aware of what those weapons are based on other letters Paul wrote to the various churches.

One obvious weapon is the weapon of truth. Believers are given insight into both the earthly realm and the heavenly realm because of what has been revealed in Scripture. We know what is behind the forces we wrestle with (Ephesians 6:12).

Another weapon is love. In fact, the Bible links truth with love (“speaking the truth in love”—Ephesians 4:15). Love is also a very powerful weapon in this spiritual warfare that we encounter. We should not approach people with anger or judgmentalism. But we must understand how important love is in dealing with others (1 Corinthians 13).

A third weapon is faith. Faith is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Notice that faith is a conviction of things that are not seen. This is an important attribute since spiritual warfare is an invisible war. Faith is the recognition of this invisible world and the confidence that God is still in control.

And a very important weapon is prayer. We are told in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray continually (some translations say to pray without ceasing). We are exhorted to pray about the circumstances we encounter and to use prayer as a weapon in our spiritual battle. When Paul talks about Christians putting on the armor to fight spiritual battles, he says that “with all prayer and petition” we are to “pray at all times in the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:18).
Sue Bohlin helps us look at work from a biblical perspective. If we apply a Christian worldview to our concept of work, it takes on greater significance within the kingdom of God.

Many Christians hold a decidedly unbiblical view of work. Some view it as a curse, or at least as part of the curse of living in a fallen world. Others make a false distinction between what they perceive as the sacred—serving God—and the secular—everything else. And others make it into an idol, expecting it to provide them with their identity and purpose in life as well as being a source of joy and fulfillment that only God can provide.

In their excellent book Your Work Matters to God, Doug Sherman and William Hendricks expose the wrong ways of thinking about work, and explain how God invests work with intrinsic value and honor. Rick Warren echoes this idea in his blockbuster The Purpose Driven Life when he writes, “Work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence.”
First, let’s explore some faulty views of work: the secular view, some inappropriate hierarchies that affect how we view work, and work as merely a platform for doing evangelism.

Those who hold a secular view of work believe that life is divided into two disconnected parts. God is in one spiritual dimension and work is in the other real dimension, and the two have nothing to do with each other. God stays in His corner of the universe while I go to work and live my life, and these different realms never interact.

One problem with this secular view is that it sets us up for disappointment. If you leave God out of the picture, you’ll have to get your sense of importance, fulfillment and reward from someplace else: work. Work is the answer to the question, “Who am I, and why am I important?” That is a very shaky foundation—because what happens if you lose your job? You’re suddenly a “nobody,” and you are not important because you are not employed.

The secular view of work tends to make an idol of career. Career becomes the number one priority in your life. Your relationship with God takes a back seat, family takes a back seat, even your relationship with other people takes a back seat to work. Everything gets filtered through the question, “What impact will this have on my career?”

The secular view of work leaves God out of the system. This is particularly unacceptable for Christians, because God calls us to make Him the center of our life. He wants us to have a biblical worldview that weaves Him into every aspect of our lives, including work. He wants to be invited into our work; He wants to be Lord of our work.

**Inappropriate Hierarchies: Soul/Body, Temporal/Eternal**

In this article, we’re examining some faulty views of work. One comes from believing that the soul matters more than the body. We can wrongly believe that God only cares about our soul, and our bodies don’t really matter. The body is not important, we can think: it is only temporal, and it will fade and die. But if that view were true, then why did God make a physical universe? Why did He put Adam and Eve in the garden to cultivate and keep it? He didn’t charge them with, “Go and make disciples of all nations which aren’t in existence yet, but they will be as soon as you guys go off and start making babies.” No, He said, “Here’s the garden, now cultivate it.” He gave them a job to do that had nothing to do with evangelism or church work. There is something important about our bodies, and God is honored by work that honors and cares for the body—which, after all, is His good creation.

Another wrong way of thinking is to value the eternal over the temporal so much that we believe only eternal things matter. Some people believe that if you work for things that won’t last into eternity—jobs like roofing and party planning and advertising—you’re wasting your time. This wrong thinking needs to be countered by the truth that God created two sides to reality, the temporal and the eternal. The natural universe God made is very real, just as real as the supernatural universe. Asking which one is real and important is like asking which is real, our nine months in our mother’s womb or life after birth? They are both real; they are both necessary. We have to go through one to get to the other.

Those things we do and make on earth DO have value, given the category they were made for: time. It’s okay for things to have simply temporal value, since God chose for us to live in time before we live in eternity. Our work counts in both time and eternity because God is looking for faithfulness now, and the only way to demonstrate faithfulness is within this physical world. Spiritual needs are important, of course, but first physical needs need to be met. Try sharing the gospel with someone who hasn’t eaten in three days! Some needs are temporal, and those needs must be met. So God
equips people with abilities to meet the needs of His creation. In meeting the legitimate physical, temporal needs of people, our work serves people, and people have eternal value because God loves us and made us in His image.

**The Sacred/Spiritual Dichotomy; Work as a Platform for Evangelism**

Another faulty view of work comes from believing that spiritual, sacred things are far more important than physical, secular things. REAL work, people can think, is serving God in full-time Christian service, and then there’s everything else running a very poor second. This can induce us to think either too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves. We can think, “Real work is serving God, and then there’s what others do” (which sets us up for condescension), or “Real work is serving God, and then there’s what I have to do” (which sets us up for false guilt and a sense of “missing it”).

It’s an improper way to view life as divided between the sacred and the secular. ALL of life relates to God and is sacred, whether we’re making a business presentation or changing soiled diapers or leading someone to faith in Christ. It’s unwise to think there are sacred things we do and there are secular things we do. It all depends on what’s going on in our hearts. You can engage in what looks like holy activity like prayer and Bible study with a dark, self-centered, unforgiving spirit. Remember the Pharisees? And on the other hand, you can work at a job in a very secular atmosphere where the conversation is littered with profanity, the work is slipshod, the politics are wearisome, and yet like Daniel or Joseph in the Old Testament you can keep your own conversation pure and your behavior above reproach. You can bring honor and glory to God in a very worldly environment. God does not want us to do holy things, He wants us to be holy people.

A final faulty view of work sees it only as a platform for doing evangelism. If every interaction doesn’t lead to an opportunity to share the gospel, one is a failure. Evangelism should be a priority, true, but not our only priority. Life is broader than evangelism. In Ephesians 1, Paul says three times that God made us, not for evangelism, but to live to the praise of His glory. Instead of concentrating only on evangelism, we need to concentrate on living a life that honors God and loves people. That is far more winsome than all the evangelistic strategies in the world. Besides, if work is only a platform for evangelism, it devalues the work itself, and this view of work is too narrow and unfulfilling.

Next we’ll examine at how God wants us to look at work. You might be quite surprised!

**How God Wants Us to See Work**

So far, we have discussed faulty views of work, but how does God want us to see it? Here’s a startling thought: we actually work for God Himself! Consider Ephesians 6:5-8, which Paul writes to slaves but which we can apply to employees:

> Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

It’s helpful to envision that behind every employer stands the Lord Jesus. He sees everything we do, and He appreciates it and will reward us, regardless of the type of work we do. I learned this lesson
one day when I was cleaning the grungy bathtub of a family that wouldn’t notice and would never acknowledge or thank me even if they did. I was getting madder by the minute, throwing myself a pity party, when the Lord broke into my thoughts. He quietly said, “I see you. And I appreciate what you’re doing.” Whoa! In an instant, that totally changed everything. Suddenly, I was able to do a menial job—and later on, more important ones—as a labor of love and worship for Jesus. I know He sees and appreciates what I do. It forever changed my view of work.

God also wants us to see that work is His gift to us. It is not a result of the Fall. God gave Adam and Eve the job of cultivating the garden and exercising dominion over the world before sin entered the world. We were created to work, and for work. Work is God’s good gift to us!

Listen to what Solomon wrote:

After looking at the way things are on this earth, here’s what I’ve decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have for as long as God gives you life. And that’s about it. That’s the human lot. Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what’s given and delighting in the work. It’s God’s gift!

Being happy in our work doesn’t depend on the work, it depends on our attitude. To make the most of our job and be happy in our work is a gift God wants to give us!

Why Work is Good

In this article we’re talking about how to think about work correctly. One question needs to be asked, though: Is all work equally valid? Well, no. All legitimate work is an extension of God’s work of maintaining and providing for His creation. Legitimate work is work that contributes to what God wants done in the world and doesn’t contribute to what He doesn’t want done. So non-legitimate work would include jobs that are illegal, such as prostitution, drug dealing, and professional thieves. Then there are jobs that are legal, but still questionable in terms of ethics and morality, such as working in abortion clinics, pornography, and the gambling industry. These jobs are legal, but you have to ask, how are they cooperating with God to benefit His creation?

Work is God’s gift to us. It is His provision in a number of ways. In Your Work Matters to God, the authors suggest five major reasons why work is valuable:

1. Through work we serve people. Most work is part of a huge network of interconnected jobs, industries, goods and services that work together to meet people’s physical needs. Other jobs meet people’s aesthetic and spiritual needs as well.

2. Through work we meet our own needs. Work allows us to exercise the gifts and abilities God gives each person, whether paid or unpaid. God expects adults to provide for themselves and not mooch off others. Scripture says, “If one will not work, neither let him eat!”

3. Through work we meet our family’s needs. God expects the heads of households to provide for their families. He says, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

4. Through work we earn money to give to others. In both the Old and New Testaments, God tells us to be generous in meeting the needs of the poor and those who minister to us spiritually.
5. Through work we love God. One of God’s love languages is obedience. When we work, we are obeying His two great commandments to love Him and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We love God by obeying Him from the heart. We love our neighbor as we serve other people through our work.

We bring glory to God by working industriously, demonstrating what He is like, and serving others by cooperating with God to meet their needs. In serving others, we serve God. And that’s why our work matters to God.

Notes


3. Philippians 1:21

4. Romans 12:1, 2

5. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14


7. 2 Thess. 3:10

8. 1 Tim. 5:8

9. Leviticus 19:10—Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God.

   Ephesians 4:28—Let him who steals, steal no longer but rather let him labor performing with his own hands what is good in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.

   Gal 6:6—The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.


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**I’ve Got a War Room—Now What Do I Do?**
Millions of people have seen the summer blockbuster movie *War Room*, many of them challenged to be more intentional about prayer. Some have even cleaned out a closet or a corner to make their own War Room.

But the movie, for all its motivation to experience the power of prayer, did not provide instructions on what and how to pray. Other than eating potato chips in secret!

Prayer is not about sacred words or flowery religious language. Biblical prayer is about talking to God, heart to heart. Here are some suggestions for what to do in the War Room.

Many people have found it helpful to follow the structure of the acronym ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

Directing our prayers and thoughts in this particular order aligns the heart with God’s heart.

**Adoration**: This is simply telling God how great He is, focusing on His character and praising Him with words. The book of Psalms is one of the best places to find truths about God and tell Him about it. Several years ago, I went on a treasure hunt as I read through the Bible, drawing a box around every title and name of God I encountered, and writing them down on the blank pages at the back of my Bible. Simply reading some of the titles of God back to Him constitutes adoration. (“You are the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! You are the Bright and Morning Star! You are the Ancient of Days! You are the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth!”)

**Confession**: Quietly consider what unconfessed sin you need to bring out into the light. Confession means to agree with God. You may not even feel remorseful about it (yet), but it is still important to agree with God that sin is sin and you were wrong. (“Lord, I confess being short-temperedly with my family yesterday. I confess yelling at that driver who cut me off in traffic. I confess going all day without once thinking of You. I was wrong. Please forgive me.”)

**Thanksgiving**: Consider the things God has given you, the things He has done for you, just in the past 24 hours, and tell Him “thank You.” The discipline of keeping a gratitude journal provides lots of things to give thanks for. The great thing about being mindful of what God is doing so we can give thanks for them, is that it makes us more sensitive to the many ways in which He shows His love and concern for us throughout each day, which kicks up our gratitude meter, which overflows in more and more thanksgiving, which leads to a joyful heart.

**S upplication**: NOW we get to the part of asking for the things we need or want, or which we would like to see God do in our lives and in the lives of others. It really helps to keep a list of our requests, just like we see in the movie, so we have a record of how and when God answers them.

This is one of the most misunderstood parts of prayer because often, people mistake having faith in the answers they want, with having faith in the God who answers prayer in His time and in His way. It’s fine to ask (not demand, and not presume) for what we want, but it’s important not to have
unrealistic expectations of getting everything we ask for like a spoiled little kid. (This is one of the reasons people lose heart and can lose their faith—they aren’t trusting the God who sees the big picture and knows what is good for us and what isn’t, they are looking for the answers to their prayers on a timeline usually faster than the one God is on.)

What should we pray for?

Our daily needs (see also: the Lord’s prayer, “give us this day our daily bread,” Matthew 6:11), financial provision (“your Father knows what you need before you ask Him,” Matthew 6:8), relationships (“it is not good for man to be alone,” Genesis 2:18), peace in our relationships (“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you,” John 14:27) . . . whatever comes to mind.

But we get a head start when we pray God’s word. This is great War Room material! Consider praying for one’s spouse (even a future spouse!) or children or friends the great prayers recorded by the apostle Paul.

“Lord I ask that _____ may be filled with the knowledge of Your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that he will walk in a manner worthy of You, to please You in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of You; strengthened with all power, according to Your glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to You, Father, who have qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” (Colossians 1:9-12)

“I pray that You would grant ____, according to the riches of Your glory, to be strengthened with power through Your Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in his heart through faith; and that he, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that he may be filled up to all the fullness of You.” (Ephesians 3:16-19)

Consider praying a Psalm, such as Psalm 1:1-3—

“I pray that _____ would be blessed, that she would not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
I pray her delight would be in the law of the Lord,
And in Your law she would meditate day and night.
I pray she would be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, she would prosper.”

Spiritual warfare was one of the elements of the War Room movie, and prayer is how it is battled and won. For the simplest form of it, we can look to how Jesus prayed for His disciples in John 17. He asked His Father:

• To keep His disciples safe from the evil one (v. 15)
• To set them apart in the truth (v. 17)
• For oneness (v. 21). The context was oneness within the Body of Christ, the church, but this is a powerful request to pray for our marriages as well.

I am also intrigued by His prayer in v. 23, “You have loved them just as You have loved Me.” Most people have no idea of just how much and how great the Father’s love is for us—He loves us the exact same way and the exact same amount as He loves His Son! I love to pray that God will allow
my loved one to grasp this truth, which corresponds to the Ephesians 3 prayer above.

Jesus also prayed for Peter before his spectacular, epic failure when he denied his Lord, that his faith would not [completely and utterly] fail, and that after he turned back, that he would strengthen his brothers. Praying for our loved ones’ faith not to fail, and for God to redeem and use any lapses and stumbles, is a powerful way to pray for them.

An important part of War Room prayer strategy, just as in physical war, is to remove obstacles to effectiveness. In Mark 11:25, Jesus said, “‘Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.’” An important thing to do in anyone’s War Room is to examine our hearts for any unforgiveness and deal with it.

Well, I think that’s a good start on your War Room! Would you like to add any suggestions? Comment below!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/ive_got_a_war_room–now_what_do_i_do on Sept. 22, 2015

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**Bad Blood Reconciled: A Review of Taylor Swift’s “Bad Blood”**

_Probe intern Sarah Withers contrasts Taylor Swift’s Bad Blood song to the deep spiritual truths of the gospel of Christ._

Naomi, a young Taylor Swift fan fighting leukemia, adopted Swift’s song “Bad Blood” as her theme song during her battle with cancer. In response to her video Naomi uploaded on YouTube, Taylor Swift contributed $50,000 to Naomi’s medical bills. Naomi through her heartwarming story was able to transform the song to make it inspiring and hopeful. However, as most know, the song is not about fighting terrible cancer but instead about a broken relationship. Although Swift did not disclose the antagonist, she no longer sees reconciliation as an option. By contrasting Swift’s “Bad Blood” with Christ’s reconciling blood, Christians are reminded of the transformative power of the gospel to bring healing and hope to broken relationships.

**Destructive Power of Bad Blood**

“Bad Blood,” through the lyrics and video, paints a picture of the pain that is felt after someone is wronged in a relationship. The antagonist attacking her and “rubbing it in so deep” left Swift with a “a really deep cut.” Many, if not all of us, have felt the pangs of being cut deeply with words and actions in a relationship gone wrong. A quick read through the Psalms reveals victims of broken relationships crying out in pain. The Psalmist laments, “Even my closest friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel before me.”{1}

Not only do broken relationships hurt initially and deeply, but often the pain lingers. Swift captures
this experience through the lyrics, “Still got scars in my back from your knives, so don’t think it’s in the past, these kinds of wounds they last and they last.” Again the Psalmist writes, “I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked.”{2} One thing both the Psalms and Swift can agree on is that broken relationships and betrayal are deeply painful.

For Swift, not only is the relationship broken and painful, it is irreconcilable. She notes the hopelessness of the relationship, “I don’t think we can solve them (problems)” and “in time can heal but this won’t.” This is the most upsetting part of the song.

We all have had broken relationships, yet the ones that hurt the most are the ones that turn from feelings of hurt to feelings of hate. We should hate sin and the pain it brings with it, but we are called to love even our enemies. Ephesians 6 says that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the “spiritual forces of evil.”{3} As difficult as it may be, we should guard our heart from future pain without hating the individual who hurt us. Thus, reconciliation should always be the ideal goal and in cases where reconciliation cannot or does not occur, forgiveness should still reign in our heart.

**Healing Power of Christ’s Blood**

It seems like an impossible request to forgive someone and even move towards reconciliation with someone who betrayed and hurt us. This would be an unimaginable task if it were not for someone who did this for us first. The gospel is the perfect example of reconciliation.

When we sin, whether or not it affects anyone, we sin against God. Our most fundamental problem with sin is not that it hurts other people, but that it separates us from the love of God. Those who do not accept Christ as their savior are outside of the effect of Christ’s atoning blood and therefore are not able to experience God’s love. However, Paul in Ephesians says “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”{4}

Before we can offer true love and reconciliation to others, we must first receive love and be reconciled to God. The only way to turn our bad blood against God into unity with God is through the power of Christ’s redeeming blood on the cross. Colossians states, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”{5} His blood cleanses us so that we are filled with the selfless love towards others that the Scriptures ask of us.{6}

**Our Fight against Bad Blood**

Even for Christians who have been shown love and forgiveness, we still do not always experience an overflowing of love and forgiveness for those who wrong us. We still struggle with having bad blood towards our enemies. We still feel the pain of the broken relationships even though we are in Christ. As Christians, we look forward to a day when we will not feel pain, but while we still live in a fallen world, pain and hurt are very much part of our everyday lives.

However, the wrong that causes our pain has been or will be paid for. As Christians, if we are wronged by a believer in Christ, remember that Jesus died for those sins as well as for ours.{7} Yes, we should still lament that even believers sin and cause pain, yet justice was important enough to Christ that He died for those sins.{8} For those who sin against us and remain outside of Christ, their wrongs will be righted at the cost of their own life in eternal wrath. The hope of sharing the gospel is to offer others the redemptive power of Christ which indeed makes the gospel good news!
Looking back to the Psalms, there is a life-giving trend even within the darkness and pain. Even in Psalm 88, which is considered to be one of the darkest Psalms, the psalmist still cries out to God. In our broken relationships with others, true reconciliation must start and end with the grace and justice of God.

God knew we had bad blood and provided a Savior to change our hearts. He still continues to hear our cries of pain and sent the Holy Spirit to continue to protect our hearts from holding on to the bad blood in our relationships.

Notes

1. Psalm 41:9 All verses are from the English Standard Version.
2. Psalm 55:2-3, see also Psalm 69.
3. Ephesians 6:12
4. Ephesians 2:13
5. Colossians 1:19-20
6. Hebrews 9:14
7. Ephesians 1:7
8. This is why I think St. Anselm was on the right track in *Cur Deus Homo*, when he argued that Jesus Christ had to become incarnate and die for our sins so that God’s justice and grace could be made manifest. If God just ignored our sins, justice would not prevail—thank God He is both just and gracious through Jesus Christ!

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**How and Why We Should Biblically Analyze Songs**

*Probe intern Sarah Withers provides insight about thinking biblically about popular songs.*

Numerous scientific studies have revealed that music is linked to relieving pain/stress, releasing endorphins, aiding coordination, increasing concentration, expanding memory, improving language skills, and lowering blood pressure, just to list a few. Unfortunately, not all genres of music offer these benefits, so it would be quite misleading to say that critically analyzing songs can act as a remedy for migraines—however convenient and persuasive that claim might be!

While I may not be able to claim health advantages, powerful benefits can be gleaned for us and others by being aware and graciously critical of songs. I hope that I can provide how and why we should biblically analyze songs and challenge you to be a more thoughtful and gracious critical consumer of all types of music.
How Do We Biblically Analyze a Song?

The most obvious first step to biblically analyzing a song is to actively listen to the lyrics and sometimes even watch the music video. It helps me focus and understand if I pull up the lyrics and read along as I listen. While I listen, I think about how the song makes me feel, what the song got right or wrong in its worldview, what I appreciate about the song, and any questions about possible meanings and interpretations. I also think about if or how I can relate to the song’s message. Have I ever experienced, desired, or seen something similar to the song’s message? If the answer is no, then maybe I could think about how seeing the songwriter’s perspective could help me relate and communicate with someone with very different desires and experiences than my own.

Ultimately we biblically critique a song by shining the light of the biblical truths on it. No secular song gets everything right for the obvious reason that the gospel is not present. For some songs all that is missing is an explicit reference to the gospel, while other songs directly conflict with the gospel. Yet, for even the more difficult songs, Christians can understand the song’s message for the glory of God.

For example, Lana Del Rey’s song “Born to Die”\(^2\) provides the message that we should enjoy life because when we die there is nothing left for us. For those in Christ, that song is radically wrong about our purpose and destiny.

However, for those who are outside of Christ, that song paints a rather apt picture of their bleak destiny.\(^3\) So yes, the song is very dark and upsetting, yet when I hear that song I can mourn for those outside of Christ and praise God that the lyrics of that song are not true for me. In that way, that song can incite worship and foster resolve to reach out to unbelievers-something Del Rey probably would never consider possible! That is the transformative power of the gospel, the greatest good news.

However, there are songs that Christians should avoid. Songs that are overly sexualized or demonic in nature may be too difficult to redeem.\(^4\) Also some people are more affected by music than
others. If you are not able to redeem the song by countering it with life-giving truths from Scripture and the song continues to bring you down, then you should not listen to it. Christians should pray for wisdom and guidance to know when to listen and engage and when to turn it off.

**Why Should We Care?**

Since music is so integrated into our daily lives, many of us are consumers of music whether we are intentional about it or not. The American Academy of Pediatrics in 1996 (AAP) found that 14- to 16-year-olds listened to an average of 40 hours of music per week. For a more conservative number, RAIN (Radio and Internet Newsletter) reported that students “spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day consuming media, 2 hours 19 minutes of which is spent listening to music.”

While these studies focus on teens and adolescents, it is fair to say that adults also listen to a fair amount of music, whether it is through headphones at work or the radio in the car. When it comes down to it, music is very much part of our everyday life. For some it can be avoided, but by most, it is accepted and greatly enjoyed.

Musical lyrics are also sticky. It never ceases to amaze me how I can still easily sing along to songs from my childhood the second the second it plays. Yet, when discussing my project of biblically analyzing popular music, a common response is that people often do not listen to the lyrics, but rather just enjoy the melody and beat. The AAP (1996) reported that “in one study 30% of teenagers knew the lyrics to their favorite songs,” which would seem to affirm that initial claim.

With those intuitions and findings, it would be easy to undermine this project as interesting but unimportant. However, the same AAP (2009) article cited the Knobloch-Westerwick et al. study that “although young listeners might not understand all the details in lyrics, they recognize enough to obtain a general idea of the message they bring.”

Moreover, the fact that we do remember song lyrics well after we have stopped listening to them shows that we are aware of the words even if we are not actively thinking about the message. In many respects we have become passive consumers of information and entertainment, especially when it comes to music. It is in light of this passivity that we should strive to be active listeners.

Every song with words carries a message, although some are more obvious and dangerous than others. For example, current artists such as Macklemore, Hozier, Lana Del Rey, and Lady Gaga proclaim more explicit messages and agendas in their songs-something as Christians we should be aware of and ready to critique. The AAP (1996) claimed that “awareness of, and sensitivity to, the potential impact of music lyrics by consumers, the media, and the music industry is crucial.”

Although the rate and impact of the consumption of songs can be debated, there are still benefits of being aware of and engaging with our culture through songs.

**What Are the Benefits?**

Well, there are three main benefits to biblically analyzing songs. First, we refine our ability to enjoy music. For many this will be very counterintuitive. People I have talked with have feared that if they are too critical of the music’s message, then they will no longer be able to enjoy it. I will agree, there are some songs that might be ruined by listening critically to the lyrics. However, Christians should likely avoid listening to those songs anyway.

Even with songs we don’t like, we can still enjoy them for their musicality and benefit from some insights, however hard to find. The vast majority of songs are redeemable even though they may
counter the gospel. Where God provides the songwriter with common grace insights, there is an opportunity to redeem the song. Remember Lana Del Rey’s song; I am still able to enjoy her powerful use of a darker sound and message, but I am also reminded of the hope I have in the gospel.

If we get to a point where we become cynical and antagonistic towards our music culture, we should remember that God gave us music and culture as a gift. The Psalms are examples of a great variety of songs that were written to offer the expression of truth about God, humanity, and our world. The obvious difference is that the Psalms are God-breathed and inspired—yet there are often truths that can be gleaned even from secular and popular songs. After all, we are all made in God’s image and bear His music-loving traits.

Another benefit of analyzing songs is the ability to learn about our culture and the people influenced by it. Regardless of whether the lyrics are true, they are believed to be true by the songwriter and often by people in our culture. Part of the appeal of songs is that they are relatable. Relatability makes the song powerful and influential.

We can gain invaluable insight into the thoughts of our culture and younger generations through the lyrics of songs. Many songs provide commentary on our culture’s view of alcohol consumption, drug use, violence, relationships, sexuality, freedom, and self-worth. By learning what the songs say about such topics, we can be better equipped to understand where people are coming from.

The final benefit which naturally flows from the previous one is being able to relate and engage with our culture. By engaging with themes in songs, we are ultimately practicing how to engage with people. I was talking with a group of high school students about one of Macklemore’s songs called “Starting Over” which is about his relapse as an alcoholic. The song is marked with shame, a deep sense of failure, and loss of identity. Before listening to the song, I encouraged them to listen to the lyrics as if a person was talking with them. With that perspective, students would be less likely to immediately judge him as a failure, and instead would be more likely to empathize and relate as we are all failures and slaves to sin outside of Christ.

By being aware of songs, we can better engage the lies of our culture and counter them with the truths of Scripture. The AAP (1996 & 2009), encourages parents to “become media-literate” which means “watching television with their children and teenagers, discussing the content with them, and initiating the process of selective viewing at an early age.” Later in the article, the authors even suggest that parents should look up the lyrics and become familiar with them. Even if you are not a parent, as Christians one way we can help correct lies of our culture is through conversations about popular music.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” It is our hope and joy that we have been redeemed and my prayer that Christians will show others the light of Christ.

So, the goal of analyzing songs from a Christian perspective is not merely an academic exercise that challenges critical thought, but to move us to action. Peter claimed that Christians were saved so “that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Ultimately we should be encouraged to talk, relate, empathize, and love others. Through songs we can help others to “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

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Notes

1. Another article that was particularly helpful was from the eMedExpert. However, if you just search “benefits to music” (or the like) and you will be overwhelmed by how many articles develop all the unique benefits to music.
2. The video includes sexual content, brief drug use, and a violent image at the end.
3. I should note however, that the song seems to hold the message of mere extinction at death. As Christians, we believe that souls are immortal which means even the non-believer persists. For those outside of Christ, they will experience death as eternal wrath and destruction. See John 3:36, Roman 6:23, Matthew 25:46, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, and Revelation 21:8.
4. To address briefly the pushback on the idea that we can or should “redeem culture”: The confusion rests in the nuanced difference in meaning of the word “redeemed.” I use the word “redeemed” in this context to mean something closer to transformed by truth, not redeemed in the sense God has redeemed believers. Yes, Scriptures never call us to “redeem culture” but God does call us to let the light of truth shine. By engaging culture with the truth of Scriptures, Christians can make aspects of culture honoring to God, thus in that sense redeeming them. For example, pornography falls under the category of “unredeemable,” meaning that there is no way someone could make pornography honoring to God. However, with different aspects of culture this task is possible and I think should be encouraged.
6. RAIN cited The Kaiser Family Foundation study for these statistics. The report also broke down how the kids and teens were listening to the music, finding that on average per day they listen to 41 minutes of music on their IPod and similar devices, 32 minutes of music on computers (iTunes and Internet radio), and 32 minutes listening to the radio.
8. 1 Peter 2:9.
9. Colossians 2:8

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