

## My First Sonnets

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#### Dedication:

This book is dedicated to all my children. While I wish them all long and prosperous lives, my deepest wish is that they live full lives. I believe that this can only come from knowing truth and walking in the light. I have laid out what I believe reflects principles of truth and light as God has revealed through his Word and creation. I want my children to know those principles, to guide their lives based on these principles, and to judge their parent's lives based on these principles. Catalina and I recognize that we are not perfect, and often fail to live our lives in truth and light. We hope our children can see through our imperfections to the work that God has done and continues to do in us – and we pray will be done in them. We extend these wishes for our children to the families all around the world.

## Preface:

Before reading any of the poems, I believe it will be helpful to understand a few key components of my writing.

**Purpose:** Some may wonder why I would make this project my dedication to children. It seems a bit beyond them. I'd like to lay out a few reasons for this work, which will hopefully help you understand it better as well.

- 1) It seems to me that the most worthwhile dedication my children could have is one that extends beyond the here and now. If I believe that preparation for the future, long term gratification, and integrity are important, then a work that will grow in sentiment seems to symbolize such a belief well.
- 2) One of my most depressing thoughts with our pregnancies is "what if I die before my children get to know me." While I don't fear death, I ache at the thought of separation and not being known. It's also hard to think about because I don't trust God enough with my children's future. I think they need me, though I know deep down that if I do have an impact on them in any positive way, it was God's work through me. So to allay such thoughts, I put my wishes, desires, and commands into writing so my children can know me even if their opportunity to speak with me gets cut short.
- 3) I want my children to be able to appreciate this when they are older. I want them to be able to look at their lives as ones that were thought of from beginning to end. I made the "ABC's," "123's," and "Colors" in honor of their birth – which is a joyous thing. But their lives aren't accidents or afterthoughts. Their births are hoped for, and we look forward to walking with them for the rest of their lives.
- 4) I want these poems to be like vows to my children. These are standards I want to embody, and what I want to exemplify to them. I will certainly fall short, but these poems are reminders to me about what is important, what I should be teaching, and how I should live.

**Sonnets:** I have found that sonnets are wonderful mediums through which to convey ideas. They hold a special place in my repertoire for a number of reasons. First, sonnets provide a known form so readers have a general idea how to read them and what to expect. Most of my sonnets are English/Shakespearean in form, meaning they have 14 lines of poetry, with each line containing 5 stressed and 5 unstressed syllables. It can be fun to read the poems fluidly, but you can also read most of them in strong iambic pentameter, with an exaggeration of emphasis built into the underlying scheme.

Second, sonnets provide a good structure to condense thought. When you have only 140 syllables. This requires the writer to be extremely intentional in word selection so as not only to fit the appropriate form, but to convey all the meaning they wish to convey.

As you read through most of the sonnets, recognize that they almost always follow the stressed – unstressed format, and an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme.

**Elin's ABC's:** Not knowing how many children we would have, I wanted to ensure that I covered the issue of character and morality with our first child. I wanted my child(ren) to know what kind of person they should strive to be. "Elin's ABC's," then, are focused on conveying aspects of character and morality that I think are guiding biblical principles. These poems are designed to set up the trait, then end the last two lines with an exhortation to embody and pursue the trait. The first letter of each poem also begins with the letter the poem is meant to represent in the ABC's.

**Atticus's 123's:** The second compilation leaves the emphasis of morality to focus more on ontology – or the way the world is. It is the nature of things. I speak of the nature of love and existence, the nature of the soul, the nature of family and structure, etc. While some of these issues touch on aspects like morality or epistemology, the core is intended to focus on the way the world is, not so much how it should be. While recognizing how it is can guide us to prescribe how we should act, my goal here was largely to describe. Similarly to “Elin’s ABC’s,” I incorporate the numbers (rather than letters this time) into the sonnets. The numbers can be observed beginning their respective lines (e.g. the sound “one” appears at the beginning of the first line in “One”).

**Baby K’s Colors:** Baby K never made it into our arms. I had these poems finished a couple weeks before we found out that our child had died. While I can’t say I’m certain about the issue of traducianism and when ensoulment begins, my commitment to the sanctity of life means that I give human life the benefit of the doubt. I believe there was a soul who was with us for a short period of time. Though we never got to know that soul, my commitment to life means that I’m not going to save these sentiments for a child we get to know better. My sentiments ring just as true for this child.

This compilation focuses mainly on epistemology – or the way we know truth. I was reminded of a song from my early Sunday School Days. “Red and yellow, black, and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” I thought about all the different people groups represented in the song and how certain worldviews and understandings of truth had developed greater concentrations regionally. Of course these are very broad generalities, but I wanted to explore some of the stereotypical epistemologies from around the world. I did this by looking at African, Asian, European, and Native American worldviews. Obviously this is a very broad generality, and it leaves out some groups. However, I wanted to use this as a starting point. From these groups, I jumped to a bunch of other epistemologies that exist and addressed those – many of which relate to atheism and materialism, as that is my passion and a lot of what I encounter here in the West today. Of course not every sonnet is strictly epistemological. Some of them are focused more on ontology, metaphysics, or morality. However, many of the poems here touch on either how we know truth, or assumptions about what truth is, or the information we take in.

These sonnets are laid out a little differently in that there isn’t a particular place where I reference the colors like I did the numbers and letters. Many of the poems do include the color, and all of them allude to a phrase that contains a color. I also laid out the poems to have a similar equation of thought each time. The first quatrain (four lines) usually sets up the ideology at which I will inspect. It makes a four-line case or summary of the notion being addressed. Sometimes this is very general - a broad look at an ideology – and sometimes it is a specific aspect of an ideology. The second quatrain usually sets up a flaw with the ideology mentioned. If the ideology in the first quatrain is true, then what about such and such? The fourth quatrain either attempts to answer the questions raised by the second from my worldview and how I think the world really works, or it attempts to elaborate on the negative statements made in the second quatrain by asserting a positive philosophy in rebuttal. Finally, the couplet (last two lines) either 1) summarizes the crux of the dilemma, 2) summarizes the solution, or 3) uses the first line to summarize the dilemma and the second line of the couplet to summarize the solution.

**Denton’s Directions:** These poems are the fourth installment and are dedicated to our fourth child. In the previous poems I have brought up moral, metaphysical, and epistemological notions. In this

installment I am going to touch more on social issues, focusing more on how different worldviews approach fixing what is wrong with the world. I chose this theme for two main reasons. First, it is what is resounding in the world right now. There are so many social issues and positions being put forth at the moment and everyone seems to be growing more polarized. I thought it would be very fitting to address some of these ideas to test them out in my mind. Second, Denton's initials are DOC. All of our kids have initials that spell something. I thought that exploring ways in which people attempt to heal humanity would be fitting.

You'll probably notice that this selection is a bit shorter than the rest. To be honest, my mental energy was sapped as our family has just moved overseas to be missionaries in Romania. I feel this set of poems contains less creativity and commentary, which I tried to supplement a little with some of the appendices. I will try to edit and add more to all of this later.

**Jemma Jayne's Gems:** JJ's Gems focuses on gemstones. While gems aren't a basic learning staple for children like the previous colors, numbers, directions, and letters, I had to go with them since the name "Jemma" brings it to mind. This set of poems attempts to cover the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5-7. Each gem covers one or two sections of the sermon, sometimes very closely, and sometimes more broadly. The poems are ordered in a manner which follows Matthew 5-7. References to what I envision each poem to represent are placed in the footnotes. I wanted to focus on the Sermon on the Mount because it has been extremely influential to me over the past three years, as I have begun to take Jesus's words more seriously.

Jesus's words in Matthew 5-7 are very hard, as he guides believers to understand what Kingdom living looks like. I hope that through these poems I can internalize Christ's words more, and I can expound on what Jesus is saying in his sermon – not in a sense of adding to his sermon, but consolidating other ideas from scripture with it. While there are a number of individual poems and sets of poems I like a lot better than these in terms of how they sound, I have to say that JJ's Gems is by far the deepest, and is jam packed with double and triple entendres, allusions, etc. For this reason, I highly recommend reading the footnotes for these poems.

As far as deeper significance goes, I have also structured this set of poems to number 12. I did this because there are two important sets of gems in the Bible, one set contained on the priest's breastplate, and one constituting the foundations of the New Jerusalem – the redeemed holy city on earth. Both sets contain a different set of gems, with some overlapping, and both sets contain 12 precious gems. While I did not go with either set of gems, as they differ and there is overlap now that we have more thorough classifications, nevertheless, the number refers to these biblical ideas.

**Footnotes:** One of the aspects of poetry I love most is the thought it produces. The reader has to work through some of the meaning – it's not all sugar coated for them. However, this is also one of the things I hate most about poetry. It often seems as though the most obscure, open-ended poems are viewed as the best. Ambiguity and the notion that everyone can create their own meaning seems to be viewed as good things. I think that's terrible in general. The author should be directing readers to an idea they are trying to convey, and readers should find out what that meaning is. Readers may not agree with the author's meaning, but the only where there is dialogue and wrestling with a text is if there is some meaning and intention one can butt up against. How else can there be any discussion or disagreement if there is only subjective shifting sands? It is for this reason that I like to explain some of the symbolism

and meaning in my poems. I try to implement a great deal of depth into many of my poems, and I don't want readers to miss my intended meaning. I don't have room to explain everything I intend, but the framework of the explanation should provide a good starting point. Please don't read any of my poems and walk away thinking they're a garbled mess. They may be terrible poems or have terribly misguided ideologies, but there is intention there, and I lay that out for the reader for them to decide and rebut – not merely opine.

**Masculine/Feminine Terms:** I have had it pointed out by others that I use “man,” “mankind,” and “men” very frequently – and that is true. When I went through these poems with this awareness, I recognized that I was ignorant of a sensitivity that I needed to address. So I went through and changed many of the instances of “men/man/mankind” to generic terms of humanity. However, there were places where this was difficult to do due to rhyme scheme and syllable count, so I left those instances. To balance out my use of the masculine as representing all humanity, I changed some instances so that the feminine would represent all humanity. So in the “Discipline” poem, you will notice that I left “men,” as it was very difficult to change without altering the whole poem. Therefore, I was able to change “men” to “women” in some poems to balance out my masculine use. Some may see this as a ridiculous concession because they think language doesn't matter – and some will think the concession doesn't go far enough because I should change all masculine instances regardless. Hopefully the reasonable, empathetic people will understand that my recognition of my language is a step towards compassion and empathy, love me for who I am, and work with me as I attempt to love others – even to the degree of taking care in my language. For from the heart the mouth speaks.

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Elin's ABC's

# Affections

*A*fflicted with a heavy mortal load

*The weight borne on the shoulders of us all  
A choice remains for each one on their own  
Press on toward goal or be pressed on and fall*

*One who has no affections has no heart  
One who has dark affections has no soul  
For anyone who lives, loves life imparts  
And any who love life doth light extol*

*So live and press on to that which you're called  
Desire with all your heart the light you see  
Bear your load through tunnel, that we may laud  
Your light encompassed soul in victory*

*Set your affections on that which is right  
Throw off all that is dark, embrace the light*

All mankind is afflicted with sin and death. We all bear the same torturous burden of imperfection, and the knowledge that our lives are limited. Beyond the obvious burden of immoral decisions in sin, the most cumbersome aspect of our journey is the twisted affections within us. As Paul says, what we don't want to do we do, and what we want to do we don't do. It is a difficult thing to press on towards the good when we often don't want to. Our very affections fight against what we truly want, and what is truly the best for us.

While we all may bear the same burden, we make individual choices when it comes to dealing with that burden. We can either choose to press on towards our goal – in spite of the burden, or we can be weighed down by our burden and succumb to it (Heb. 12). I by no means intend to imply that we need to just grin and bear our burden. We do have a choice, but the only way we will succeed is by casting our cares upon Christ (1 Peter), and fixing our eyes solely on him rather than our burden (Hebrews). We only succeed by realizing our inability and giving that up to Christ. The focus is on the end goal, not on the current burden.

Every human has affections (desires/loves). The only human who doesn't have any affections is a dead human (or a heartless one as I say here, pointing to the source of physical life). Any man who lives will have life impart or bestow loves/affections on him/her.

Likewise, a human who does have affections, but embraces the dark affections, is a human who is spiritually dead (or a soulless one as I say here, pointing to the source of spiritual life). A human who is truly alive spiritually will embrace light/life. While Christ does sometimes mention that we must throw our lives away for his cause, he is referring to our clinging on to temporal life and goods. Here, life means true, abundant life – as Christ has called himself both life and light in John. The two often go hand in hand. A truly alive person embraces and glories in the light, and thus true life.

My desire for my children is that they have affections for that which is light. That is the goal that truly imparts life.

While we bear our burden here on earth, all we often see of the light (and true life) is a glimmer. Here I allude to the common phrase "light at the end of the tunnel." We are encompassed by the burden of darkness, but we press on towards the light. That is the true source of life, our goal, and the hope that awaits us at the end of the tunnel. This is largely a summary of the whole poem, but it is more in the format of an exhortation.

# Beauty

*B*eset by distractions from all around

*Afflicted by deception in oneself*

*By what means then can true beauty be crowned  
That allow it to maintain its fair wealth*

*This world only leases, never to own*

*Merely insipid, fabricated things*

*Overwhelming masses, lest they bemoan  
A façade that could never hold their gaze*

*But darling, truth, it opens up one's eyes*

*It scintillates inside their very being*

*So when they look with love or with despise  
They can't avert eyes from what they're seeing*

*Present yourself with truth and without guile*

*And all will stare in awe of what is real*

With all the distractions that are in the world (“world” as in the fleshly world, not as in the natural world), and all the “pleasures” with which it and the media entice us, how are we to sift through and determine what is beautiful? It makes our job more difficult. That difficulty is compounded by the deceit that is present within ourselves, as we often times fool ourselves as to what is truly beautiful.

Everything the world throws at us to satisfy our craving for beauty is temporary. We lease out our fulfillment of beauty and pleasure, but the world cannot give us that fulfillment because it does not own those things.

The strategy of the world, then, is to constantly throw “beauty” our way. Definitions constantly change, fads change, and the items that satiate our temporary desires change. By inundating us with fabrications of real/true beauty, we often don’t have time to be discerning about what true beauty is. Yet we do get inklings of this, as we recognize there is temporary satisfaction. What the world throws at us never holds our gaze. It is fleeting.

Truth is at the core of true beauty. Whether it’s mathematical truths that make the art appear beautiful, scientific truths which are beautiful to our minds, or moral truths that – when fulfilled – make our souls feel good that the world is how it should be, those things are beautiful. The purity and intrigue of seeing things for what they truly are fascinates people as it comes together and shows how the world truly is and/or should be.

While I believe beauty is strongly linked to the true essence of something, this does not sit well with everyone. Whether others feel threatened that their true selves will be exposed, whether it’s jealousy, or something else, some will despise beauty and truth. Nevertheless, they will be captured by it. And at least they’ll get a glimpse of reality, which will hopefully one day change them.

When we encourage our children to be beautiful, this isn’t to say that we are concerned with them looking physically beautiful. While that may be great if they are, their true beauty comes from presenting their true selves, not a façade – whatever that may look like to others. That is not to say just being yourself is beautiful. Nobody would say that of the serial killer, the kleptomaniac, etc. This notion of presenting one’s true self needs to be tempered with the rest of the 25 poems I am writing. Your true self is unique, but at the same time must fit within certain parameters. A boxer’s strength in his hit is wonderful inside the ring, but is generally bad when used outside. Likewise, being truly human and being truly fulfilled means living with an understanding not only of who we are, but of who we are meant to be. In this sense, beauty is something that can very actively be pursued in a non-superficial sense. In fact, it’s antithetical to superficial, as it is not putting on makeup and putting up fronts, it’s the tearing down of facades and living in true reality.



# Courage

*C*omfort is sparse in a world of despair  
Where hope is oft destroyed before it's born  
And sparser is it still in a world where  
Those attempting escape, by masses scorned

*But those depressed should never keep you down  
For you must kick against goads that oppress  
And though masses compress from all around  
Your job is to live well, not to impress*

*Comfort in this world is in courage found  
As courage releases from bond of fear  
It's only master he who is not bound  
Its only source, freedom from the austere*

*Press on, move out, into the world's expanse  
Be burdened not by man and his commands*

Comfort is difficult to find in a world where you know that everything could be demolished tomorrow. [Here I use the word comfort to be somewhat synonymous with “peace.” In a world of difficulty peace provides the only comfort, which is why I sort of use it interchangeably]. It’s even harder in a world where, for many, it seems as though the deck was stacked against them from ages past- before they were even born. Whether it’s class systems, genes, educational opportunities (or lack thereof), etc. – the world is cruel. The word “world” here is used in a single syllabic way. People sometimes pronounce it “world” or “wer-uld.” To pronounce it with two syllables would throw off the meter and flow.

What makes this world even more difficult, is that since many face the same hardships and threat of destruction, they often scorn those who are able to escape and find temporary or significant comfort/peace. Our culture glories in rags to riches stories, yet it’s often in a very envious sort of way, as we live vicariously through the success of others. However, we are often cynical about those in power, those with wealth, and those who succeed. It isn’t long before those who have succeeded are viewed with cynicism, as envy and greed take over. The same can be said of those who have perpetual peace. The comfort I hope you find is a comfort that is not a result of money, power, or certain forms of success. In fact, my desire is that your peace would come from your ability to escape the notion that those things can bring you lasting comfort and peace, as I mention at the end of the poem. Many will not understand that, and will scorn you regardless of where you find the source of your peace.

Whether it’s the world or the people that try to keep one from comfort, the imperative is that you fight back against that oppression. Your job is to live well and live at peace with the knowledge that the world and the people in that world ultimately have nothing that binds you or obligates you to what they decree. While others are important, they are important not because they create the rules and expectations to which you are truly bound, but because the true moral ontology binds you to live an exemplary life that comes in contact with those who are bound by self and fabricated structures. It is in this higher call that you can show them freedom from their oppressive systems they create, and the oppressive systems to which they willfully bind themselves. Therefore, don’t worry about what anyone does or thinks, as impressing those who have no peace is a futile, irrational endeavor. Rather, live outside their constrained bounds so you can help them freely, and be an example to lead them out of their oppression.

Courage is what provides us comfort/peace in this world, because it recognizes fear as largely irrelevant, and pushes on with what it knows must be done and is more important. Without the fear of the world or others, one can live in comfort and peace regardless of circumstances.

The only one who can control courage, however, is one who is not bound to those things that produce fear (the world and people). And the only way one cannot be bound to those two things is to throw off the overbearing, tedious rigidity of the moral and social law. This is an allusion to a reliance on grace and being bound to the one who gives us freedom from the law – Jesus Christ. We can have courage because we are bound to the one who has freed us from this world’s fear, and to himself in his victory and continued power over it.

This courage gives us the ability to move out into the world rather than remain back, being overly protective and concerned about our status and possessions, if we were fortunate enough to experience any of that. But it doesn’t matter, since that is not what fulfills us. I desire you to daily throw off your encumbrances and live in grace, which is a position that provides immeasurable courage, and will surely exemplify it in one’s life as such.

# Discipline

*D*esire's end leads to desire' for more

*And more leads to desire for it now  
World's enticements make it hard to abjure  
Instant fulfillment to which we kowtow*

*While it seems all good things come to an end  
No truly good thing comes without long start  
For time invested in great discipline  
Grows deeper pleasures which it can impart*

*Desire's grand - affections we all need  
But it makes terrible ruler of men  
My long grown desire' is that you'd be free,  
Your desires controlled by discipline*

*Look far ahead and always count the cost  
What's now fulfilled kills time, forever lost*

\*I use the apostrophe to denote when “desire” is read with 2 syllables instead of 3 to help the reader know my intention, since meter and iamb are so important for reading sonnets. “Desire” is sometimes pronounced as DE-SIRE, but is also pronounced DE-SI-ER. Here I use the various pronunciations to aid the formation of the sonnet into the typical pentameter a little more easily.

Desires are good overall. In fact, the very first poem was about “affections,” which are essentially desires. However, I think the term “desire” can connote more short term, emotion laden wants. Desire’s end (fulfillment/goal) is often addicting, leading to a desire for more (food, entertainment, power, money, etc.). We love the reward of achieving what we’ve desired. But the more we get, the more we tend to want. As we wallow in our desire and our focus on achieving those ends, not only do our desires increase and become insatiable, but our desire for the immediacy of the results grows as well. I discussed in the last poem how fickle the world is with its distractions and pleasures, and I bring that up again here. In a world that provides constant enticements at your fingertips, it is easy to get in this downward spiral of desire and immediacy. While desire, possessions, pleasures, and the like are not inherently bad by any means, it shouldn’t be hard for most of us to see how desires easily move from something possessed by individuals, to something that possesses individuals – often in the form of materialism.

While everything here on earth fades – even the good things – the fickle, instant pleasures the world offers us are particularly fleeting (just like the pseudo-beauty we see as alluring us and failing us in the “Beauty” poem). While many good works and good investments will eventually fade as well, desire placed into the hearth of discipline will forge a much stronger, richer product than those crafted hastily. It is much more worth the while to meld desires with discipline. I use the word “grow” here to allude to something that takes time (we usually think of plants and the effort of gardening). It is not matured from the start, but must be coddled and cared for until it reaches fruition.

We certainly need affections, and it is even something I desire for my children. However, that comes with the caveat that I placed in the “Affections” poem. Those affections must be of the light. The affections that are of the light rule well, and tend to be affections that require discipline to achieve. Since we are caught up in a world and in a body that are temporal and fleeting – and since what is truly worthwhile is that which invests in the eternal – it makes sense that what is valuable would take time to build. That’s not to say that this world and our bodies are bad in the gnostic sense. We know that being truly human now and in the future requires embodiment. The body (or bodies) is/are good. Rather, it’s acknowledging the current limitations of this particular body and world. It’s also important to know that I am not being double minded in desiring affections and discipline both. But even good desires can lead men astray, as they lose sight of the long term goal and the discipline it takes to get there. Desire and affections are both great, but if the desire – even good desire - becomes the goal or ruler, it becomes insidious. It isn’t just the heinously evil who fall short, but the Pharisee as well.

I make sure to note that my desire for my children to be disciplined is a long grown desire. That hints back to the previous stanza where I note that it isn’t all desire that’s bad, but desire without discipline – or desire without putting in the time for it to grow. I’ve been alive over 28 years, and my desires for what is best for my children have grown through many experiences, challenges, failures, successes, etc. This is not a shallow desire or one I expect will just be exhibited by my children. It’s a desire I have for them, which means for that to succeed, it is also a commitment to them on my part as I nurture its growth in them.

Those who do receive instant and/or shallow gratification of their desires may scorn others who abstain in discipline, either because they are jealous of those strong enough and dedicated enough to build lasting riches, or because such actions shine light on the fickle reality of their works and make them look bad. Either way, their instant gratification has a cost. It kills time one will never get back, and will never again have to invest in that which is truly, lastingly meaningful and fulfilling.

# Empathy

*E*motion laden culture we indwell

*Accosting our senses at every turn  
Displaying evils straight from gates of Hell  
Embracing sensual sights for to burn*

*Such high emotions are a strong litmus  
Indicating culture desensitized  
For what else can explain this consensus  
To entertain atrocity and vice*

*Oh how the world needs people who can feel  
Those who relate to even the mundane  
And those who will run to rather than reel  
Women who hideously cover pain*

*Run out into the world in empathy  
Stand with men where they stand, don't turn and flee*

Our society is filled with high emotions. This goes hand in hand with the “beauty” I mention society constantly throwing at us. We are inculcated to pursue stimulation and instant gratification. We’re constantly bombarded in the media, on YouTube, in discussions, etc. – about the horrendous evils and provocative, sensuality that is present in our world. Some of these things are so evil, it appears that they come straight from Hell, while others so embrace vice and the carnal desires of man, they cause us to burn with lust and shallow, carnal desires. While many may not think the two (pleasure/atrocious) on the same level, here I link them with “Hell” and “burn” to show that they have the same source and connotations.

The fact that we are enthralled by such extremes in feeding our emotions shows us we’ve been desensitized. We’ve acclimated to lesser emotions. It is a travesty of our senses that we cannot sympathize with that which would have been a tragedy in other times and other cultures. Nothing other than a searing of our emotions and consciences could explain our whole culture’s affinity with such extreme emotions.

It now takes a huge atrocity for many to feel any semblance of sorrow or sympathy. That desensitization banishes those who have “lesser,” but certainly severe or difficult situations they deal with to a time of utter loneliness. It invalidates their hardships and the emotions pursuant to those experiences. The world needs people who are sensitive in their emotions and can empathize with those who experience evil against them, especially evils that most others who are desensitized would consider mundane. Likewise, the world needs those who can empathize with others struggling with temptations and vices we might otherwise think harmless. Most will never commit atrocities against large groups of humans, and most will never murder another, but many will be utterly lost and sidetracked in the “mundane” sins and struggles, along with the guilt and despair that brings. We need those who can empathize with the common man. At the same time, we also need to be sensitive enough to what is right and wrong that we do not fail to call evil, evil. Ironically, it is only by identifying and calling out evil that one is able to begin counteracting the effects of it. It’s like the first step to recovery, as you need to acknowledge your problem before you can address it and the consequences of it. While that may be easily accepted when it comes to calling out atrocities, it is usually deemed as judgmental, bigoted, or condescending when doing so about vice. However, just as it is unloving for a parent to fail in the disciplining of their child, or a friend to avoid being honest with their friend about a potentially harmful decision, so it is unloving for us to fail to identify evil and name it as such. This is a huge problem in our society, as anyone who speaks out against sins our culture has now embraced due to a seared conscience and emotional palate, is railroaded into compliance with the social and moral norms. Regardless of being called bigots, of being criticized, of being berated, and of being persecuted – we need to speak out against evil. However, one who has the characteristic of empathy (as well as many of the other characteristics I mention in this compilation) will do so in a loving way. Yes, evil is bad and brings judgment, but one who empathizes and lives in grace understands that they also are under judgment, and but by the grace of God, they would be in the other’s shoes - and often are in other shoes, and the one in need of another’s empathy. Rather than criticize from afar, then, the empathizer will put themselves in the other’s shoes, understanding that a savior has done the same for all. The empathizer, therefore, approaches the grotesqueness of atrocity and the grotesqueness of vice in much the same way – not with self-righteous judgment, but rather with courage, faith, grace, hope, kindness, love, majesty, nobility, optimism, humility, respect, a servant’s heart, thankfulness, vulnerability, wisdom, the power of Christ, and zeal (see past and future poems).

The word “reel,” here, serves three functions. 1) It means what is probably most apparent. We should run to, not reel from those who are hurting. 2) I do not include the “from” in the phrase “reel from,” so without the reader filling that in for themselves, it literally reads that we need to run to men, not reel men. In this sense, it means that our words and actions should not cause others to reel from us. 3) While Christ calls believers “fishers of men,” here I push back against that concept because of our cultural perceptions. I don’t think it’s a bad analogy of what we should be, but I think it conveys certain connotations in our culture I would like to avoid. Rather than standing on the bank or being in the safety of a boat and fishing for “fish,” we need to see ourselves as part of our culture and those who are suffering. We are not forcing or reeling others to us. Our actions and our hands-on involvement and love will compel others towards us. This is extremely distinct from our political activist Christian culture, which believes that the political sphere is really our savior, and following strict, moral laws is what will save others. In this sense, they are trying to drag (or reel) culture forcefully rather than getting their hands dirty. To me, this seems more of a pharisaic picture. We’re telling the world they need a savior, then showing them with our beliefs and

actions that this savior is really politics and moral laws. We are our saviors and the saviors of men. This needs to be adamantly pushed back against by those who are saved by grace from the moral law which has seen all men fall short, even and especially the self-righteous.

We also need those who can empathize with the worst of it all. Those who can meet our society and the world where atrocities are made and vices nurtured. While that all may be wicked, we are called to be lovers of men, even men who are our enemies. It is easy to forget that the worst are still humans, but it is vital to remember this so we can reach them, and so we can be humbled as we see who we truly are without God's continued intervention.

\*I say here that "women" hideously cover their pain. This is not intended to single out women at all. Rather, it is meant to balance out my use of the term "men," as explained in the preface.

Sympathy is me sitting here feeling sorry for someone else. Empathy is me relating to someone else and therefore performing an action in response. I desire for my children to run out into the world and to stand right alongside those who are in it – whether the mundane or the worst of the worst. I do not want them to react to the world and pull out of it. Withdraw style Christianity's sympathy lies only in a sympathy of self. "Why, Oh Lord, do you tarry and leave me – your blessed and righteous child - here to suffer alongside such evil?" I want my children to hold up others as they bear together the consequences of evil which have been brought on by all who are evil, including them. This sort of empathy stems from a humbling acknowledgement that we all are part of the fallenness that pervades this world, and only one minor appendage in need of working towards the redemption and support of all.

# Faith

**F**orgotten promise - longing since long gone

*Humans believe in nothing but what is  
Without belief that right will turn from wrong  
Faith is as distant as forlorn promise*

*But lack of faith about what is to come  
Is symptom of a hope that is not there  
For how can one have faith in hope one shuns -  
Freedom from pleasure's tendrils of despair*

*I hope you cling to promise as we do  
I hope your life is steadied by your faith  
I trust your faith will surely be imbued  
Faith in and sustained by Almighty's grace*

*Set your affections on the things above  
And faith will follow, in the things to come*



When Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden, there was a knowledge of loss and a separation, with a hope of all made right. Likewise, in early Christendom, there was a fresh revitalization of the hope of restoration, as Christ and his promises were near in heart and mind. However, most seem distant from such hope of restoration today, even Christians, as they don't really seem to align their faith and hope with the claim of redemption and a lasting, possible, future hope. All we seem to believe is that which is before us. While that may look slightly different to different people, it is basically the beliefs that the world is cruel, evil usually wins, vice is rarely punished by God's fist, and good men die and suffer. The world is not right, and we have no hope of realizing that rightness. I don't think it is a coincidence that dystopian stories are prevailing in our culture at the moment, alongside voter turnout being so low. We are as cynical a society as we've been for some time, and if we are finally coming to the realization that we can't affect change in the real world, why not accomplish the impossible vicariously through fantasy? Often times, these beliefs about how the world actually is lead people to wonder why they themselves shouldn't indulge in the pleasures evil seems to bring with surety, if God is just going to be lax about it – if there is a god at all. There is no judgment and no forthcoming promise, therefore there is no hope in anything other than the moment, so live it up, *carpe diem*, YOLO.

Without the belief, or hope, that what is wrong will be made right, faith is as far from our hearts as dwelling on seemingly broken/never going to be fulfilled promises are from actually being fulfilled in our minds.

This reiterates the last section. Our lack of faith isn't a fault of mustering on our part. People don't just garner faith in themselves. As many who are into doxastic voluntarism will attest – we can't "just believe" something. Belief is something that is fostered, not mustered. Faith is a result of hope, as Hebrews 11 says. Our lack of faith generally belies our claims of hope.

Unfortunately, our lack of faith is much deeper than just a forgotten promise. Not only have we thrown off faith in restoration, but we've replaced that faith with another belief. We believe that restoration isn't coming and therefore that vice isn't punished, that good men do suffer, and that earthly pleasures are the best consolation. We are now so enthralled by pleasure and vice, that we are averse to hope, even if we see glimmers of it every now and then. We are held by the tendrils of earthly desires and are so caught up in evil's false promises, we no longer even want another source of hope to exist. Sensuality and immediate gratification have become our hope, and therefore our rulers. I know I've talked pejoratively about "pleasure" quite a bit, but I by no means intend to promote asceticism. The issue I have is not at all with pleasure, but with fostering true characteristics, true pleasures, and those true experiences of the light which bring about lasting, full joy. Pleasure – particularly temporal, fleeting, pleasures devoid of light – are terrible masters if they are pursued as an end in themselves. Their hope lasts only as long as their momentary stimulation.

I desire that our children cling to the true hope, not as distant, but as near – just like their parents try to do (though imperfectly). I hope their lives are controlled by their faith. Notice here, how I use the word "hope." I have a hope for my children, which fosters certain aspects of what my faith looks like for them.

I transition from using the word "hope" to "trust," which is intended to be synonymous with "faith," plus add a notion of a reliance and relationship that trust typically connotes a little more strongly (in my opinion). I have faith that faith will be granted to my children. Here I don't speak of my children garnering up their own faith, but rather I trust that God will impart that faith to them. Were that faith and its promises to rely on my children, I would have a very limited faith in their mustering of it. No amount of imperfect genes, imperfect parenting, or imperfect children could provide me with surety of their faith. However, God and his promises and goodness allow me to have faith in him, and therefore my children's faith through his power. That is one way we are reminded of the immediacy of the future, perfect promise, as we see the beginning of God's redemption and promises come to fruition in the lives of us and those whom we know and love, understanding what a miracle it is that these imperfect lives can be impacted and changed.

The summary exhortation emphasizes the order of operations. Our hope comes prior to our faith. We broken, destitute sinners recognize our position, and realize that a way has been made for us. Our hope in that mercy and grace is the spark that ignites faith within us. Faith is not simply believing without seeing, but rather seeing a goal

so clearly, we can't help but believe. Our faith is the result of seeing the finished work of Jesus Christ as we are regenerated, in contrast to the opening of our eyes to the truth of the depravity in which we lie, the evil we create, and the sinfulness in which we relish. Perhaps out of all poems, this will be the most contentious – as it most belies a particular theological camp. Nevertheless, the point is that many have lost hope, embraced evil, and focus/rely on self. I want my children to hold hope close, keep evil far, and rely on their God - their only hope.

## \*Grace

*Good men are thrown into the sea of fate  
Drowning in ocean's fury, towards demise  
Praying that deeds sufficient will abate  
Tempestuous abyss preventing rise*

*But women entangled in their good works  
Sink heavier than one unencumbered  
For good women seeking favor from earth  
Find their favor when god they seek, inters*

*Daily men die and languish in the sea  
Daily you must avoid their same mistake  
Eternally you live and set men free  
Eternities, the costs that are at stake*

*Be burdened not as you unburden men  
Live in grace, and with it grace all's presence*

While I believe that “good men” could be replaced by “all men,” I think it works best as it is. I think this is particularly the case because all men think they’re good men – at least for a time. Even most who believe they’re lower than others (e.g. certain classes in class systems), they think they’re good for sticking to that class and “following the rules.” Others who may accept and embrace that they’re “bad” and continue to pursue that path, are no longer men who are alive, but have already been devoured by and interred in the earth, as shall be seen later. Their embracing of earthly pleasures and fulfillment indicates their death and embracing of it, at least in their soul. This fury of the sea batters us and ultimately attempts to pull all of us down – some sooner than others.

Most men fight the seas of life with good works – karma. Your good deeds will come back around to you, or your good deeds will negate or abate the fury of life, either in the corporeal or ethereal sphere, or in both. Maybe – if one happens to be good enough, they can rise above the turmoil of the sea and live in peace and comfort.

Those who attempt to rise via good works miss the point. To truly live free, we cannot add to ourselves. Attempting to avoid sinking by encumbering ourselves makes things worse. It entangles us and weighs us down as we fight each incoming wave (Heb. 12). We must throw off our burdens and the weight of sin which entangles us – stripping ourselves naked – looking only unto Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him, stripped and striped himself for us.

Men who are attempting to receive favor from the earth (earthly pleasures, earthly comfort, earthly possessions, imperfect peace on earth, etc.) are worshiping the earth. That doesn’t necessarily mean the granola type worship, but people who are fully invested and focused on this temporary, earthly, mortal life. All men who worship this as the ultimate end eventually find it, as the earth obliges them and makes them permanent fixtures when it inters them in herself. Ironically, the abyss of the earth is pulling at men, and to escape her, they worship her. While the earth sets out with fury against man, men tend to worship this wicked tormenter rather than seek one who is greater and more benevolent than she.

All men are struggling to stay afloat in the sea, and many will be pulled down to their death every day. But my desire for my children is that they will not be weighed down by the same encumbrances of putting stock in their good works, or temporary, earthly relenting of the tumult. In the “Nobility” poem, I will allude back to this poem, as I exhort to live above the sea seen here, and I explain the source of the power to embrace good works.

But I hope more for my children than they just escape the wrath of life themselves. I desire for them to seek and save the lost. I want them to reach out with grace to others, empowered by the grace that saved them from the sea, and continues to shelter them from the tempests daily. It is not merely self that is at stake, but the eternities of multitudes.

Grace is a double edged virtue. It is first a virtue that we must receive. It unburdens those who are burdened. It is the extension of mercy and favor to those who are not necessarily worthy of mercy or favorable. Because everyone is lesser than another – and all are lesser than God – we must be freed of our burden if we are to be able to help others (like oxygen masks on airplanes). But for those who have received true grace, it is impossible and damnable to hoard that grace for oneself. It frees us and compels us to move out into the world, extending grace to all whom we meet, as all are in need just as we. Those who receive grace do not likewise extend grace because they are required to – which would be antithetical to grace. Rather, grace compels them.

# Hope

*H*ouses rest upon strong foundations  
Great lives rely upon the very same  
Both will crumble if they are weakened  
Both will hold strong if they are well maintained

*Abode alone, as life in shambles,  
Cannot for long withstand a tempest's beat  
For wind is stronger than wooden beams  
And troubles batter hollow souls, effete*

*So as you build this life of your own  
Do so first with your pick and with your spade  
Rest upon your deeply entrenched hope  
So your faith and love will stand through the waves*

*Your life cannot rest if not arrested  
Be grounded in hope's solid foundation*

To symbolize hope, of sorts, I altered the normal sonnet scheme slightly. The first and third lines in each stanza are 9 syllables instead of 10 (one syllable short of the expected pentameter). That makes the poem read differently, and it seems incomplete. It is very awkward to read, especially in the context of all the other poems which tend to read in more fluid iambic pentameter. It just feels as if something isn't right, especially if you read it with emphasis on syllables. It is only in the final couplet where everything is brought together to fit. This is meant to symbolize hope, as the reader should be hoping for resolution, and expecting it, then finally realizing it at the end.

Out of all the poems in this series, I feel like this is the most straightforward in meaning. To live a full, guided life, we really have to have a strong foundation. I believe that strong foundation is mostly hope. Hope indicates where our focus lies, and in turn will guide all of our other characteristics. It will determine where our affections lie, how much we're willing to endure, etc. While the greatest of faith, hope, and love is love, I believe that is due to its effect on others and the impact on the world. But without the hope to ground that love, I don't think love would be willing to endure, it wouldn't be as strong, it wouldn't be as deep. Hope grounds it all because it's based upon our ultimate goal and desire. So before you work on other affections, you must first dig deep and figure out where your hope lies.

This sums it up. If your life is not captured by some hope- if you're not deeply invested in some area – particularly a worthwhile area - you are aimless and your life will be in ruins internally, externally, or both. The only way we get rest and build strong is by being grounded in a strong foundation, having a hope with a foundation built upon rocks rather than sand.

# Inquisitiveness

*I*llustr'ous mankind vivit in mundo

*Yet most choose to survive absque luce  
Taking advantage of life's large loop hole -  
Thriving off others' work, in the mundane*

*But more is life than mere utility  
To hold a grudge at mass for ignorance  
Life is the one, precious Ubiquity  
That's called to subjugate all dissonance*

*So you, with life, should never stand to bear,  
Darkness, which like all, you were born into  
For never should you be a subject here,  
Where you were meant to conquer and to rule*

*Be ignorant not, for this is not bliss  
Answer your call with inquisitiveness*

Man is “illustrious” regardless of his accomplishments. All man is made in the image of God (as will be expounded upon in “Majesty”) and has significant dignity. While some men end up accomplishing more and being illustrious for more reasons, as shall be seen with the inquisitive ones in this poem, we all have a basic, but profound dignity and worth. Although we all share the same dignity and worth, many choose to live in the darkness. However, I use the word “survive” here because it’s not really living. It’s a shallow getting by. Since the topic is inquisitiveness, I used Latin here (hopefully Google Translate was accurate). Understanding Latin was a symbol of the learned in the Western World for centuries. I also used Latin to hopefully require the reader to be inquisitive and seek out what it meant and why it was used (*Lives in this world / Without light*).

I consider life’s loop hole to be that most of humanity thrives off the advances made by those who are inquisitive. Most of the advances, discoveries, and good things brought forth to the populous are from the inquisitive. The masses benefit from the work and attributes of a few. I used the word “loop hole” for another reason. I talk about how those who aren’t inquisitive choose to live in darkness, and then use “loop hole” to allude to the notion of a physical hole/cave. The willfully ignorant are a subterranean breed. There are organisms that can thrive in underground/cave systems, but they do so in darkness and in an extremely limited fashion compared to those on the surface.

But if all I was bemoaning was that a lot of people don’t contribute to making things – or being useful to me – that would be a childish grudge to hold against someone and their preference, and a selfish grudge at that.

But to live - particularly to live with true Life (as discussed in *life and light from Affections*) - carries a call upon all who possess life. The ubiquity of life is not that human life is everywhere, but that we have been given dominion, to use our life to rule everywhere. We are called to “tend and keep” the garden, which implies not only a “no harm” policy, but a betterment notion as well. Now that the world is fallen, particularly as Christians, we are called to seek restoration of the world as it should be. These two lines also have a double meaning, as “Ubiquity” is another name for God, and has particular connotations of his omnipresence. In that sense, the call to dominion of [human] life is everywhere, along with the true Life. While human life attempts to answer their call to stewarded dominion, the true Life rules over all things actually, and will bring all dissonance into subjection, restoring the world as it should be.

With Life and Light, anything that has a hint of darkness should be empty and repulsive. You were born into ignorance and sin, but you should not remain there. Embracing ignorance, therefore, should not be palatable. You should be inquisitive and seek out answers to the intellectual, natural, and redemptive problems in this world. This isn’t for the purpose of knowing more than someone else, or simply making mindless pleasures to ease those in the dark through their meaningless lives. It’s because learning is part of who we truly are, and is one step towards our own restoration as we attempt to fulfill one of our original tasks given before the world and our selves were felled. It also helps us to enjoy our creator more, as we learn more about the world he created, and more about the ubiquity in which he resides, while at the same time being awed that the Ubiquitous One resides specially, particularly, and instantially within us. Many early scientists knew this well, as many declared the desire of God as the main reason they pursued knowledge of the natural world.

To give in and embrace the darkness is denying who you were called to be. It denies your humanity. It also fails to shed light into the darkness in an attempt to make that darkness repulse. This will be resonated again in the “Majesty” poem, as it explores our call to rule and uphold the dignity of mankind as he was created to bear the image of God.

Ignorance is not bliss, it is mundane, dark, and unfulfilling. To be who we were meant to be, or answer our call, we need to be inquisitive. To answer our call, we must ask questions.



# Joy

*J*uxtaposed beings bright with their fair gift  
Dark out the sun, the source which doth sustain  
Ignorant of their ever wide'ning rift  
Where Joy's bereft - remuneration, pain

*Why is it these creatures abhor the light?  
Why is it creatures indulge agony?  
Tis better than to bear sun's blinding sight  
And better than to feel vicar'ously*

*But joy is not a bar that's set too high  
For no bar could extend unto the sun  
And sun the one who sets the bars awry  
Op'ning bars to make merry, everyone*

*Do not be double minded in this world  
Let joy shine in and on and through your soul*

I'm going to provide a brief summary here (TLDR) before I go into detail, as it may be hard to understand how this really fits joy. Man and God are juxtaposed in that they are both similar in their light (life), yet man is dark because of his turning away from the source of his life (God). While man thinks this provides him with autonomy and true joy, it creates darkness and a gulf between true joy and themselves – instead, bringing pain and despair. Men do this for one of two reasons: 1) because they hate delayed gratification and want to personally experience the pleasures others are experiencing now – they don't want to miss out on fulfillment (or what they think is fulfilling, or 2) they can't bear a hope so distant, and a perfection so unachievable, especially when it requires reliance on someone else (see "Faith"). However, joy is not a bar so low as to require instant gratification, and it's not a bar set so high we cannot achieve it. Ironically, it is only by the vicarious (from the previous paragraph) that we can have this hope. Since God and Christ are above the bar, they can empower us to get over the bar, achieving joy. In fact, they're the only source to empower us. But not only can they empower us over the bar, they free us from the prison bars in which we're trapped. And not only are we freed and empowered, but they open up the bars of libations to make us merry. It is these three things (freedom from all, empowerment to accomplish, and merriment for our souls) that allow us to experience joy.

The beings I am speaking of are humans. Their fair gift is their life, particularly the human life empowered by their soul. This magnificent breath of God breathed into humans, however, is juxtaposed by the darkness created by their turning on him. While there is still light in them, and while God is still light, humans have turned from that light in an attempt to block it out from their eyes and minds.

Humans are and have become ignorant of the cost of blocking out God and masking over the indwelling of light in them. While humans turn away in an attempt to find what they believe is true pleasure, happiness, and joy, they are really trading joy for pain. While they may experience momentary pleasures, compared to true joy, all they get is pain.

So if light is good and its absence leads to agony, why would anyone want to blot out the sun? As Milton says in "Paradise Lost," "better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." Our imperfection causes man to strongly resist the light. It is sometimes difficult to look at the light either because it hurts our eyes too much due to our sensitivity to it from dwelling so long in utter darkness, or it hurts to see what the world is not and long for what seems so impossible and distant. We trade illumination of our wrongs and a hope for what is to come for temporary, momentary, indulgences. It is difficult to see others seemingly enjoy this life, and to trust God, the source of the light, for a future we have to wait for and cannot control in regard to its certainty. Rather than allow others to enjoy this life, and rather than trust in the vicarious works of Christ and his imputation towards us, we only trust what we can experience - and we want to experience it through our senses and selves, not by watching others seemingly enjoy what we're not. We throw off everything so we can be in control. Ironically, if the future were in our control it would be certainly lost, yet we refuse to rescind our perceived power over to God, the one who guarantees success and victory, which is ultimately our only assurance for joy.

But an expectation for true joy is not an impossibility. While we may believe the bar for joy is too high for us to hurdle (which it is), that bar is not higher than the sun. And since the sun is the source that sustains all life (as seen in the first stanza), the sun can sustain us over any bar lower than itself.

This sun (or Son, as it is intended to doubly mean) is able to not only get us over the bar, but also break the bars of our imprisonment to free us. Furthermore, the Son opens the bars making us merry (the marriage feast of the lamb and the celebration of his power over sin and death as he draws his beloved to himself). The allusion here changes from a bar to hurdle over, to bars of a prison, to a bar of libations. Jesus's first miracle was turning water into wine, you know.

To have true joy in this world, one cannot be double minded. True joy comes when we have our faith, hope, and affections set on the sun/Son, which is the only thing that can set us free, get us over our hurdles, and make us merry. The sun is the only one that can sustain us and give us true light, life, and pleasure. When we set our mind solely on that, we can have joy regardless of our circumstances. I pray that my children would have joy shining on

their souls, from God – they would have joy actualized in their souls and experience that – and they would allow joy to shine through their souls as a testimony and healing to others.

# Kindness

*K*aleidoscope of stories which to parse  
To find a morsel worthy to repeat  
Chapters of our lives are extremely sparse  
With that which helps to make them most replete

*But who is it that has a hand to write  
To fill the gaps and erase the mistakes?  
Only one whose hand wills to be in mine  
Only one's helping hand that gives, not takes*

*Not all do live, though all will surely die  
And most will spend their whole lives in duress  
The only ones free, those who help their kind  
Freeing by killing tyrant with kindness*

*Walk hand in hand, along with fellow man  
Together write a story life demands*

There are billions of human lives, many of which come from unique backgrounds. Add to this that each human story probably averages around 70 years, and you'd think that we could only scratch the surface with delving into them. However, with all the stories available, there are relatively few portions worth repeating. How many truly touching memories do we have compared to how much time we've spent on the Earth? Most stories are missing significant portions of that which is most fulfilling and meaningful. I also use the word "replete" here for two reasons. First, it counters the notion of "scarcity" in the previous line, as "replete" connotes abundance. But most people also synonymize "replete" and "complete," which also fits what I'm trying to say. So the actual meaning and the misconception of the meaning are both what I mean here, as it truly helps to make this idea the most complete.

So how can we fix our stories and the stories in the world? How can we erase the mistakes in the current stories and add to the emptiness of them? The hand that can fix the stories is the hand that partners with others, and the hand that helps and builds up rather than takes for self. While there are many stories out there, like a kaleidoscope, most of them just look like repetitions of the others, in an individual and disjointed manner, yet all similar.

Not all men truly live, or enjoy the life they have. However, all men will physically die. Until that death, most will live in bondage and struggle.

The only ones who find freedom from the fear of death after life and bondage in life are those who choose not to be kept in bondage. A huge sign of one held in bondage and fear is a focus on pleasure and self. When an individual is fearful of death and wants to escape bondage, they often do so by attempting to indulge their senses and enjoy their life as much as possible, for they know death will one day come to them. They want to make the most of it, and that means a complete focus on self, and often involves taking from others. But those who truly enjoy life, write a story that is complete and meaningful, and escape the fear of death. These are those who live in kindness. Kindness is a sign of one who is living in true freedom, as they are able to focus on others constantly, in spite of self, often to one's own earthly detriment and cost. This kindness not only kills the tyranny of materialism and a focus on fleeting pleasures of our life, but it also helps to force the abdication of the tyrant in the lives of others, as they see self-sacrifice, and that light shines into their darkness, into their life. While worldly altruism can often do the same thing, this altruism typically contains unacknowledged undertones of self-centeredness.

Whether one helps others to feel good, to try to appease God or others, or for status - that sort of "kindness" is a means rather than an end. True kindness is not used as a tool to obtain something for self. Self-centered altruism is still under bondage.

I hope my children escape the bondage of life and the fear of death, and use their freedom to help others, and write a story their life demands, and the lives of others demand from them. This is a story their savior demands from them, as he stretches out his kind hands to touch their lives and walk with them as they create their story - and as they shape the stories of others through their love.

# Love

*L*abor of love for which our world was wrought

*Prepared for him who reigns preeminent  
All by his words the one true word begot  
With one resounding, ever infinite*

*Now world has turned destroyer of itself  
Begrudging all are its inhabitants  
Denying him who reigns and divvies wealth  
Foregoing infinite for mere pittance*

*But love is kind and never will it fail  
It's patient as it humbly perseveres  
For knowledge of world as was will prevail  
In consecrating a love that endures*

*Forget not the word that has brought you life  
Bear all things for same reason word bore stripes*

Our world was created for love. It was created for Christ, the one who reigns above all. At the same time, it was created by Christ. It's sort of like taking your girlfriend to Build-a-Bear. You pay for it, you do it for her, but she builds it herself.

Solely by words, the true Word (Christ) begot the world. I also use the "One true word begot" because it can also be read "One true word, begot." This points to Christ as the only begotten of God. The last line also has a double connotation. The way it's supposed to be read points to one word still resounding. When Christ spoke creation into existence, he said it was all good (complete/finished as he rested). However, one word resounded throughout time and into eternity, and that word is "love." The other way this can be read is "With One resounding, ever infinite." This just points to Christ's resounding from eternity past to eternity future, through the pages of history, and into eternity, which he has done mainly through love.

The world created in perfection, however, now begrudges all creation and all others. We have thrown off the ruler to make ourselves the rulers. However, we forget that by throwing off the ruler, we're also throwing off the only one who can give true wealth. We trade another's reign for our own, but in doing so, we trade riches for a pittance.

But love has many features that will cause it to prevail, despite the currently bleak outlook. I took these from the 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 passage, but I couldn't fit all those characteristics into the sonnet. The world was created in love and for love. Since it was created by the perfect ruler in perfection, and since that perfection has been working through the course of history, we know that love will prevail in the end to make the world as it once was. But this time, the love will endure forever and will not be thrown off.

My charge to my children is to not forget the word that brought life (the creator's words). To have true life, they must dwell and relish in his word. They must also bear all difficulties for the same reason word (or creation) bore stripes (as words are stricken in a paper, this is intended to show corruption or difficulty). The reason the world was allowed to diverge is love. Ultimately, love will win out, and it was only due to love that it ever could have deviated. However, there is also another meaning here. The Word brought you true life, and the Word bore our stripes (rather than strikes). This alludes to Isaiah 53 where it discusses our healing through our savior's stripes. In summary, this poem is probably not what one would expect for "love." It isn't a great, feel-good poem. But I think writing as such felt patronizing and demeaning. Love is a beautiful thing, but it's not a frivolous or easy thing.

We rarely see the Hollywood version of love and good times play out. So rather than minimize love, I attempted to ground it in assurance, but clearly state its current state, the problems it faces, and the cost for its ultimate realization. At the same time, I try to portray the utter confidence we have in its ultimate fulfillment, grounding our love in both necessity and desire. Our world may be very unloving, but it was born in our savior's love, is borne by our savior's love, and will be born anew in the culmination and realization when the ultimate, redemptive love is consummated.

# Majesty

*Milieu of peasants grovel at our feet*

*Our mere presence enough to halt their breath  
Their ignorance of their own royalty  
That which drags them down to subservience*

*These masses, they've thrown off their dignity  
To serve a master, wretched, just as they  
They've traded self for world's debauchery  
Infinite worth for a temporal pay*

*Now peasants kneel, stooped in their poor disguise  
Heads bowed, eyes down, seeing only their feet  
Standing with others, whom like them, despise  
All they think they are, all that they can't see*

*Now rule this world in light of your true worth  
Bow not to one who bows knee to you first*



All mankind is royalty because we are made in God's image, as He brings us value. However, most do not realize this. Most act as groveling peasants. Their ignorance of their own royalty is that which makes them act as peasants and peons in this world – servants to its whims, lusts, desires, fears, and bondage.

These royal peasants have knowingly or unknowingly traded their dignity for a lifestyle of debauchery that debases and detracts from that which makes them most valuable. They skew the inviolable image that they seek to obtain, so that while still bearing the image of worth, it is far from their view and understanding.

Despite most acting as peasants, it is a poor disguise. It's both poor in that it is a peasant disguise which devalues, and poor because it fails to actually disguise their dignity. They and most others may not see through the disguise, but that is more because they are willfully blind. They blend in with the majority of others, and therefore don't expect to see anything different. All the while, they despise themselves, but also the royalty they wish they could be (which they unknowingly are).

Live in light of your majesty and true royalty. Bow to other men in light of their true dignity as well. However, do not bow to anyone who first bows to you as a subject. Those who are bowing in this way are peasant-minded. They do not understand the true value of human beings. To give in to them is to allow their debasing position and validate that is to allow the redefinition of human dignity and the image bearing aspect of humanity. This debases the true value of man. While these individuals still have dignity in full beneath their disguise, and that dignity must be acknowledged, they must not be bowed to or given in to. The royal who realizes their royalty must stand against the debasing of man's dignity. Ironically, by not giving into these debasers and bowing to them, we are actually upholding their dignity as well.

## \* Nobility

*N*imble are feet of one who runs the plains  
And strong the arms of those on precipice  
How deep the lungs of one from Ocean's bay  
And tough the skin of those born on the steppes

But no one's birth could prepare them for good  
Fleeting and heavy, dense in the abyss  
A thing so weighty few men ever could  
Dwell alongside in Euclidian bliss

But quickened are the minds of noble men  
Robust their sensibilities alike  
How full their souls with the breath of heaven  
And soft their hearts to that which is divine

Live lofty in abode above the sea  
But do so in air of nobility

I basically attempt to cover the regions of earth where most would be born. I cover the coasts, the plains (grassy/wooded areas), steppes (rolling, treeless planes – like the Mongols), and mountains – hitting on the strengths one may associate with each of those regions.

Regardless of the beneficial attribute one may obtain by the region with which they're associated, no strength could prepare a man for good. It is something that surpasses any strengths with which a man is born. It is quicker, heavier, denser, and deeper than man can grasp, as portrayed in the "Grace" sonnet.

Not only is this true in the physical realm, but in the mental realm. The Euclidian model of reason was based largely on first principles. We find a largely agreed upon starting principle, and build up from there. However, as we find in our society and throughout history, "good" has been a hugely fluid and highly manipulated idea. While I would argue that it is a knowable, static sort of thing, it is very difficult for fallen man to grasp it securely, and impossible in our state to do so perfectly. It's hard to come up with a first principle and have a well-reasoned discussion with other fallen men, knowing that they are corrupt, and knowing that we ourselves are also corrupt.

This is why nobility is a vital characteristic. While most may think of nobility in the "royal" sense, I covered that notion in "majesty." Whereas majesty deals with the recognition of intrinsic value and living up to that, nobility here deals more with the lofty moral or mental ideas to which I exhort my children to be in tune, as well as assent and comply. A "noble" thought, for instance, or a "noble" goal are notions they should recognize and for which to aim. Those who are centered on noble principles are lofty. While mere man is born on the earth and lacks what is needed to dredge good from the lost depths – the bowels of the earth – noble man is equipped beyond mortal man. Noble man has a quickened mind and can grasp fleeting good. Noble man is sensitive and can perceive emotions that are vital to sensing situations, but also knowledge of the senses that helps him to know when senses are deceiving. Noble man can dive to the depths, bearing evil and despair – clinging to good as he pulls it from the abyss without faltering, without floundering, and without foundering. And noble man is in touch with that which makes and keeps him noble, the divine. All of these attributes correspond to the individual attributes represented in the first stanza, although the "soft" actually seems to contradict the notion of "toughness" to which it is supposed to correspond. However, I would argue that a soft heart requires a very tough person to bear such a weight.

I hope you live above the depths of this world that entraps and hides good from the likes of most men who are born (see the "sea of fate" from the "Grace" poem). But not only do I hope you don't drown in the sea, or merely live a nice life on earth as others struggle, I hope you live above the ground, in the air of nobility. I hope you live in the heavens, as the spark of divinity in you calls you to do. Live connected to God, live with the breath of heaven, and live with your heart, mind, soul, thoughts, and deeds higher than can be swallowed by the abyss. Do not be dragged down into evil and despair, but live above, and use that nobility to pull others out of the sea of fate.

# \* Optimism

*O*rwellian allure of the helpless

*O*piate du jour of the hopeless mass

*P*et of the cynic, comfort in distress

*P*essimism lies in half empty flask

*T*yrant soars, seeking only his weak prey

*T*ime leaves the lost out of our history

*I*lls befall those who see no use to pray

*I*ntoxicants, a fleet-footed quarry

*M*ay your life be more than journey at hand

*M*emories one longs only to forget

*I*slands of solace, only source of land

*I*n which you spend your time digging for death

*S*ettle not for the bottle's empty lies

*M*ake merry with optimism's new wine

This poem spells “optimism” down the side. It’s intended to give only two letters at once to help one see a pattern forming, yet taking the whole poem to form. It’s supposed to make one somewhat expectant at first, and more optimistic of the completion as they draw near the end.

The despair of the helpless, seen in pessimism, often moves them into pushing a tyrannical government through, either in hopes of change, or because they have no hope left they might as well. Often, it seems, this resort to the tyrannical is more steeped in revenge, as the overthrow of the system usually involves significant purging of the powerful and the aristocratic, and often brings more misery than was before. Pessimism in the hopeless is also an opiate for many who feel they have no recourse in society. It causes them to take advantage of the system, spiraling the system into more and more decay. Yet this pessimism fuels the hopeless in their vengeance and beliefs, as they become addicted to their depressed view, and the very state which makes them pessimistic. Finally, the cynic who acts calloused, is really in despair. The cynic coddles pessimism as a pet, their only comfort in what they think they know is reality. But all that pessimism brings is a half empty flask of inebriant. It’s a frequenting of the bottle as an escape disguised as a solution. It doesn’t even have the decency to leave a full bottle. It’s nearly gone already, and will only satisfy temporarily, really just masking the issues, and most likely leading the drinker to a near withdraw when their drink leaves, but their state does not change.

Tyrants soar (like Tyrannosaur, ha ha) like nimble birds seeking their prey and an opportunity to rule and devour. But they are also thunderous lizards, despicable, vile, and overbearing. Pessimism’s end with the helpless is death and destruction. The hopeless likewise lose out, as they spend their time grumbling and changing nothing, spending their whole lives merely wallowing in their despair. In reality, time forgets them as they fail to exact change or produce anything worthwhile. They just end up being the mindless peasant pawns or plebes, amassed in a future history book, podcast, or Frankenstein novel. Finally, the cynic becomes ill, whether in depression, ulcers, a hermitic state of atrophying, or whatever other social or physical disorder befalls such men. This all happens because the cynic sees no use in praying. Were the cynic to truly believe that God existed and could exact change in the world – whether God chose to do that or not – the cynic would not be a cynic as all would not necessarily be lost. But that would require faith and hope. All these evils that come as a result of man’s pessimism, once the intoxicant wears off, are very sobering. It leaves the pessimist wanting back on his drug of choice. In fact, while the main meaning here is “pray,” it also works into a double meaning, as the pessimist’s cycle is to seek intoxication for so long, to “prey” on it, that they eventually give up. Intoxication is a fleet-footed prey, often escaping its captor, and leaving them with a reminder of their hunger and thirst for their appetite to be satiated.

I hope my children’s lives are more than just this life in the moment. That’s what the world says it is, but that’s so depressing. I also hope it’s not a life filled with a past that drives them to pessimism.

As stated in several poems, we are all in the sea of fate. Some of us, however, find a few moments of clarity or sanity, and these are our “islands of solace” amidst the tumultuous sea. When most think of deserted islands in the middle of the ocean, the notion of digging implies burying or digging up of treasure. However, here it signifies one frivolously digging, or one digging one’s own grave. I hope my children don’t live in pessimism, these lonely islands that pop up every now and then in the sea of life. And on these islands – or moments of sobriety and opportunity for clear thinking - rather than getting grounded, their solace is found in pessimism, which is really the digging of their own graves, a preparation for the death and gloom of what’s to come.

This is a play on both pessimism and the notion of the phrase “bottle’s empty lies.” Here, I switch around the meaning. Rather than pejoratively speaking of “the bottle,” the bottle is a good thing. The reason pessimism is bad is because its intoxication is fleeting and empty. The intoxication of optimism and hope, however, is a new wine – libations filled to the brim. Don’t settle for temporary pessimism. Embrace optimism’s intoxication. It is a new wine, filling the wineskins to the brim. It isn’t half gone, and it’s uncorked for celebratory reasons, not an attempt to cover issues. Make merry with this abundance of newly made, fresh, filled to the brim wine that is not fleeting. Optimism is the evidence of hope’s expectance (similarly to “faith”), and as Christians, we are called to be filled with joy, hope, and faith.

# \*Pride

*P*innacle of our work, the harvest comes  
Aided only by friend and harvest moon  
We pluck their sustenance and plenty from  
The hand of fate wielding impending doom

What more is there to revel in than this?  
Seizing our lives from clutches of the wild  
Who can think of better ground for hubris  
Than providing for man woman and child?

But revelers err if they dare forget  
The soothsayer's hackneyed calls for reprieve  
Whether one knows or remains ignorant,  
Pride cometh just before the autumn leaves

Work hard and be proud of your endeavors  
Weep when you begin to feel fall's shivers

The world is a cruel place. Often we feel everything and everyone is out to get us, except for a few who are extremely close to us. There is no better example of man's struggle with nature than that of the food supply. We must harvest or die. It's a very cyclical event, but there are so many factors and so much riding on the harvest. If there is no harvest – for whatever reason – people die. Harvest or doom. Life, then, must be pried from the hands of fate constantly. It isn't something that just continues uncontested. But the forcefulness with which we must pluck life away from fate also means that one day, due to exhaustion or misstep, fate will win.

What should make us more proud in life than the work in supporting ourselves, and particularly in supporting our community. Such pride seems nobly earned. This is an especially American/Western notion, where self-sufficiency is the ultimate source of pride. Second to self-sufficiency is altruism. While there is some sense of solidarity in altruism, I also think much of the worldly altruism is a relishing in one's own works and pride as well. While we generally assume altruism is about another, it is a huge source of self-righteousness and self-benefit for many who give. The feeling behind this giving is often, "I am so self-sufficient I have more than I need. Let me be merciful to one who hasn't been as disciplined and good as me." The act of supporting self and then showing off that self-sufficiency and its abundance to others is all about building and upholding an image of self - to self and to others.

However, those who revel in the pride of their work should remember the one who tells the future. While the notion of a soothsayer implies the mystical, this soothsayer knows the future because he's wise. Just as the men relishing in their pride understand natural laws of no work equaling destruction, so this soothsayer knows the natural and moral laws of much pride equaling destruction. If mankind forgets or remain ignorant, putting their stake in their own, tangible works, they err greatly. Their need is to humble themselves and recognize that no amount of work will save them ultimately from destruction. The humility required for salvation from doom is not so much a work of self, but an accurate recognition of the situation and one's position in that situation. Though many may think this prophecy is banal and overdone, and many may think it false as they rarely see it come true, or they can give examples where it does not.

Pride comes before autumn leaves. This has a double meaning: 1) in this story, harvest comes right before autumn, or the leaves of autumn. The harvest moon is the first full moon prior to the autumnal equinox. This story and harvest take place before autumn's leaves set in. This is when pride begins as well, because the harvest was the source of the pride. One's accomplishments lead to their pride. 2) The common saying when discussing pride is "pride goes/comes before the fall." Thus pride comes before the leaves of autumn in this poem. I recognize that the verse technically says "pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before the fall," but I think the spirit of it all and the common saying work well here. Anyway, this is basically saying that pride comes before the fall, and the wise soothsayer is telling the revelers to beware dwelling on their pride. 3) A third meaning can also be derived from this. Pride comes before autumn leaves, as in "goes away." Since pride is obtained before the leaves of autumn, and pride leads to the fall or destruction, we could also say that this destruction is represented metaphorically by the winter season – barrenness of the land and death. The reason the harvest brings such pride is because men view it as their self-sufficiency in avoiding their own destruction, or destruction of their kind (self, line, family, community, species, etc.). So pride comes before the leaves of autumn in the harvest, and it leads to destruction as it comes before autumn leaves or goes away (winter). It provides a false sense of security to revel in this year's harvest, as pestilence or fire can destroy this year's crop, or the next year may not be so plentiful. This world and its hands of fate are ever upon us and leave no room for any security, as all is temporary and distracting from what is ultimate and inevitable.

This is the first and only poem in the series where the one thing I wish for my children is one thing of which I also want them to beware. It is important and appropriate to be proud of the work they do. If there wasn't pride in the work, it is probably either unnecessary, not beneficial, or poorly done. Pride also connotes an understanding of the undergirding of ourselves and our work (hopefully) – God. However, to dwell on our work as the end itself, and to revel in our pride is to invite destruction. I desire my children to have pride, but when they feel the shivers of autumn's approach, they must heed the soothsayer's warnings of wisdom that call for a doom even more weighty and looming than temporal consequences of a poor harvest.

## \* Quiescence

*Q*uiet nights pause and linger on the most  
Filled to the brim with thought and reflection  
In quiet minds, a memory's best host  
Thoughts find a way to wax luminous sun

*Sun's rays shine bright, they pierce and raze the night  
Sending dark back to perpetual gloom  
They warm the land - once fallowed springs to life  
Releasing breath from its once barren tomb*

*A day goes by in twinkling of an eye  
When night returns, greeting spry day with peace  
Once thoughts, like stars, they dance across the sky  
Traveling homebound, in their sweet release*

*Allow beauty and thought in your presence  
Greet every day with twilight's quiescence*



I find that quiet, still, beautiful nights are the best for thinking and pondering. They are so still and magnificent, they really bring peace to me, but they also stir in me deep thoughts. And while I believe people certainly remember the crazy, active moments the most or most vividly, it's amazing how many serene, beautiful moments shape one's thoughts and character the most. While we may remember vibrant moments, it is upon nights of quiescence that we reflect upon what those moments meant, and solidify their importance and images in our mind. I think those quiet moments are vital to a healthy mind and thought life. They solidify our thoughts, but they also help us to sort through and organize our minds appropriately, so our memories are accurate and most helpful when we recall them. These quiet, pondering nights are ones that while physically dark, allow our minds to be illuminated. Unfortunately, our society is not conducive to such things. We are always going and always find ways to occupy our minds with anything other than self-reflection and thoughtfulness.

It's easy to live day to day, allowing our minds to be overgrown with vegetation and strangled in darkness. Being quiet and still allows us to hack back the weeds and make a path for clear thinking and illumination, whether that be with new thoughts or novel, synthesizing thoughts about old memories and experiences.

It's amazing how time stands still in these quiet moments. When you come to again, out of the abode of your mind, you may find yourself amazed that you time traveled. You spent a lifetime in your mind, yet didn't move anywhere in time.

But just as stars - born from the gasses and dust – explode and streak across the night sky, so it is with our thoughts. (I recognize that “shooting stars” aren't really stars but meteors/meteorites, I like the poetic imagery so I'm going with the figurative in the literal sense). They began as minutia (gas particles), were formed into existence as something grand, and then return to dust as they streak across our mind to land somewhere.

Whatever you do, make time for quietness. Have a quiet spirit with others. Think, think, think – especially before you speak or pass judgment. And when possible, make extended periods of time to do this (your mother refers to these as “cave days”). This is important to a healthy mind, soul, and body, and it will help you to ensure that you are aligned in your reasons and thoughts. It keeps you on track and helps you to get back on track. Quiescence goes hand in hand with inquisitiveness.

# \*Respect

*R*esilience is a currency inert

*As are the many virtues here discussed  
These currencies, the soon fermenting wort  
Fungible, growing interest in time's trust*

*While some build up their funds along with time  
Others are granted riches from their birth  
Monies no distinguisher of the kind  
No respecter of acquisition's worth*

*Position, then, and virtue are alike  
Both earning preference and high esteem  
With both made bankrupt in the tub of vice  
Or with envy sought when aged as a mead*

*Time is not a respecter of persons  
So use your time to gain respect of men*

Resilience – or persisting through even the difficult times, along with all other virtues and strong characteristics – is a currency of sorts. Those values lived out, in time, accrue and earn interest. I liken them to the wort (pronounced WERT)– the portion of the beer that has just had the sugars extracted from the grain, and moves into the process of fermentation. Virtues are like this, as they grow over time. Virtues accrued are also fungible in a sense. Whatever the virtue in which you are investing, it is of the same sort of currency. This is also a play on the notion that for wort to build up into a substantial product of alcohol, it requires yeast, which is part of the kingdom “fungi.” These virtues invested, with time, grow in value, as does the ABV.

While some receive their riches as a result of their investment in virtues, others receive it by their birth. The goal of the poem is to point out that people earn respect in two ways: they build it up due to their character or they gain it as a result of their position. Birth, then, does not here mean that it’s necessarily given to people due to their lineage. Rather, when they are vested in a job that confers respect (civil authority, educator, religious leader, etc.), they can gain it through means other than their character. This isn’t to say that they may not have also earned it via their character, and positions of higher esteem generally filter candidates by their character. Nevertheless, there are certainly two routes to respect, whether divergent or not, at times. Regardless of the route taken, either group can cash in on the respect they have in the bank. A civil authority – whether worthy of respect in character or not – can demand respect just as one who has earned it with character. Romans 13 deals with this situation of sorts. Positions demand respect.

So both position and virtue demand respect. However, both are also made bankrupt by vice. They have the same weakness. One who invested in character will be bankrupted with his character in vice. However, so will one who demands respect due to position. Scandalous presidents, corrupt cops, and pedophilic educators and clergy have all lost respect in the public’s eye, even though some may still maintain the remnants of their position. But as both are made shambles in vice, both are lifted up with time, as a mead. I chose the comparison to a mead because this particular drink is one that is better with extended age (unlike many others beverages, whose tastes fall out over long periods of time). Whether one has lived a lifetime of virtue or held an esteemed position for an extended time, age and time maintain and demand respect.

Time demands our respect in another way. It is not a respecter of persons, meaning it will treat us all the same. It will pass us by. That is why we must respect time and use it to build on virtue and the time in our position. We must treat others with respect who are deserving of respect, and we must build up respect for ourselves. And most importantly, we must do this consistently and remain resilient in our character both in terms of its strength and duration.

# Servanthood

*S*urreptitiously performed deeds of grace  
Feats most women rarely dare complete  
For who can find time to challenge the pace  
When on one's knees, washing enemy's feet

*The dust one finds on sandal straps and thongs  
Same dust one ate only two hours before  
Becomes now dust on top of harbored wrongs  
Resentment heaped on embers by pride's door*

*But choking dust and fire that burns one's soul  
A forming trial, and one perspective makes  
Head bowed, a reminder to be thankful  
You lost the race to Hell's un-quenching gates*

*One has already gone to Hell for you  
In servanthood, walk in another's shoes*

Servanthood is not about recognition. They are surreptitiously performed feats of grace. True servanthood is rare to find. It's infrequently performed, and if you do find it, it is very likely to not be true, complete, utter servanthood – as the action may have sought discovery.

When you are on your knees serving others, especially those who are a direct challenge to you (your enemies), you are risking losing out in the race of life (wealth, power, etc.). You are not only helping your enemy and the competition, but you are putting yourself out of the race by not resting up and taking care of yourself.

As one washes his enemy's feet, he can only imagine where the dust he's wiping off their sandals has been. That same dust being wiped off of the sandals is from the same dirt you ate as you trailed your enemy/competitor only a little while before. And now the distance between you will be even larger tomorrow, as you take care of your enemy instead of yourself. It's a reminder of your loss in the race and your enemy's advancement. And as you serve your enemy, you remember all the races, all the segments of races lost to him, all his wrongs against you. And you remember all of this in light of your desire to be number one. Serving your enemy reminds you of your loss and your status in the race. It makes you resentful and fuels your hatred of your enemy even more, and even as you serve him.

But this pain that we experience from our sacrifice, whether in being left behind, eating the dust of our enemies, or struggling with our own internal pride and resentment – it is a visceral reminder of our true state. It provides us with tangible reminders of reality and fallenness.

As our head bows in humiliating, resentful, difficult servanthood – as we are called to do – it reminds us to pray. It reminds us that we are bowed before a God who has washed our feet – his enemy's feet. It reminds us of our need for a servant. And that burning within us – in our lungs and in our soul – it reminds us that we lost the race, but it was a race we needed to lose. To refuse servanthood, to refuse grace, to refuse love, and to refuse bowing our heads in acknowledged submission would be to continue pursuing the race. But this race finishes at the gates of Hell. They are fiery gates that will not abate the burning within you. Rather than quench your burning, they would continue it and amplify it for all eternity, as you would have sought wealth and power over a relationship with God. That is why we need a servant. That is why we bow our heads to our enemies.

Fortunately, we have one who was a servant for us. He accosted the gates of Hell and conquered them. He walked in our shoes and dealt with our Hell so he could prevent us from entering there. In light of this, we live as servants, willing to walk in the shoes of others, into the hells they face, and up against the very gates of Hell we know have been conquered for us. We serve in humility, but with great pride and assurance that our service is one bent on prevailing as we serve a living God and savior who is making the world his footstool, and making all come into subjection to him. So while we may lose this earthly race, it is a race we want to lose and save others from through servanthood. Furthermore, I hope that you find a way to truly love serving others, and not deal with the human aspect of the resentment that can accompany serving others.

# Thankfulness

*T*repidation's aroused by mere being  
Living afraid that we won't truly live  
Our trembling hands and hearts both agreeing  
Tis much better to receive than to give

Receiving in desperation or fear  
To ease the tremors with a hasty fix  
Leaves recipients looking far and near  
For a source where they can score their next trick

But she who delights in what she now has  
Fears not the future, nor throws away time  
For hands and hearts filled up with what they have -  
Need nothing more to add to make alive

In thankfulness enjoy the life you own  
And share that wealth with everyone you know

Fear haunts all who are living – some more than others. We all, at times, have a desire for more. We fear that what we have isn't enough and we aren't truly alive. We need more money, more things, more hobbies, more charity notches in our belt. We need to be fulfilled. All of these things – including charity for the purpose of making ourselves feel good – are looking to gain. Giving with the intention of gaining is not truly giving. It may benefit another, but it is not a virtue. Yet as humans, especially humans who rely on reciprocal altruism (particularly the atheist blends), this is the type of thought we're drawn to. What benefits me? What do I get out of it?

But actually obtaining goods doesn't solve our tremors. We're still shaking, and while we may get a quick fix (used to mean both a satiation of our addiction and a perceived "fix" or solution to the emptiness of it all), we will return to trembling very shortly, like any other addict does as they continue to pursue their empty, erosive mistress. When the trembling comes back not long afterwards, these addicts are looking for their next high, in whatever realm that may be, betraying the real solution and worthwhile endeavors.

Ironically, those who are the happiest and least fearful are those not seeking more, but those who are content with what they already have, in the state they're currently in. These individuals are not worried about the future, and they also don't kill time scrambling around looking for a fix. They are enjoying the moment continually, and their focus is on their life rather than on what they want their life to be. The focus is on enjoying the good in life rather than subduing what they perceive as bad.

Content hearts and hands are filled as they enjoy what they have. They have no room or desire for more, as there is no room or need for that.

Thankfulness is a partner with contentment, and I use it in a synonymous way here. If you recognize that what you have is a gift – you could have less – you don't deserve what you have – it causes one to be so thankful for what they do have. The perception that one is owed great things is what leaves so many empty in pursuit of those mythical cryptids. But thankfulness makes a content heart and a full life. It is not empty, as there is no room for that, and it is not chasing after banal, vain, empty affections. And it is only in the fullness of your own life that you will be able to move out in true love, giving to others. For how could one ever give of what they don't have?

# Uniqueness

*YOU* will never in your life find a moment where you find yourself concerned about your looks or about your hair

*End sarcasm*

*I know your world will fill with all the pressures that ours has, but take a cue from those of us who have experience*

*Queues are already beginning to be formed, with family and friends, cults and marketers galore*

*You must not drink the punch, you must stave off with your life, or soon you'll find you've auctioned it for quite the measly price*

*Eat rather from the apple of your true Father's eye, in whom you will always be loved, whom always in you delights*



Since the poem is about uniqueness, I thought I'd throw a few things in that made it a bit different. 1) Instead of the normal capital letter (which would be "U" for this), I capitalized "YOU." This is done because "you" is a homophone for "u," so it's still capitalized in a sense, but it also highlights the true goal of uniqueness. While all of the other virtues and characteristics fit a largely agreed upon definition, an individual is one who makes something unique. So "you" is appropriately capitalized as it emphasizes that the uniqueness resides within and is defined by the individual. 2) "Unique" is spelled down, like it was in the "Optimism" poem. However, it's done differently. It's done with words instead of letters (You = u, End = n, I = i, Queue = q, You = u, Eat = E). Most poems I wrote here didn't have anything written like this (only Optimism), so I thought this would add a touch of uniqueness. 3) This is not a sonnet. All other poems in this series have been a sonnet. 4) This does not have a normal rhyme scheme. It kind of does its own thing. 5) It does not have a set meter. 6) I never put the actual word in the poem ("uniqueness"), whereas I have in almost every other one.

No matter who you are, you are concerned about what others think, if only at times.

Those who have gone before can attest to the pressures that will be faced. We know the temptations and the pitfalls. However, since we've gone before, our experience provides good reason to listen to our advice and exhortations.

These two lines aren't really hyperbole. I know that parents, grandparents, some in our church family, friends, and others already have ideas of what our children, their children, and the children of others will be. They have notions of how they will invest in them, expectations they have for them, etc. We've even received mail about baby stuff, investments, college savings plans, DNA banks, and religious things from the JW's (not particularly for our kids, but trying to sell to us, which would in turn have us selling it to our kids as they grow up). Many of these aren't particularly bad things. The community's job is to teach and it is to impart values and hold expectations. But that's a mighty weighty job, and one that no party will do perfectly. So as an individual, it's vital that my children recognize that others are in line to shape them. They need to know that they must live their life as themselves. While I exhort my children to heed the voices of experience, they must discern when a party is attempting to inappropriately detract from their domain of who they are for personal reasons rather than for upholding concrete, objective moral standards. While there are domains that are not ours to decide (i.e. most areas of morality), all parties will overstep their bounds at some point in an attempt to conform individuals to their notion of value. Do not "drink the punch" of such cultish calls for devotion. It is a death sentence to self. Do not auction away your life to the highest bidder, or most invested party in your life. This bid is still offering far too small a price for your life.

I had originally left out the "true" from this sentence. However, upon reflection I realized that I am one of the parties bidding on your life. While I hope and desire that I will always delight in my children and love them, I cannot guarantee that I will never falter, and I will never attempt to conform them to my created values rather than valuing them for who they are. But despite my future (and hopefully few) failings, I know my children have a true Father who will always love them and will always delight in them. He will also always watch over them, and is able to prevent and fix the damage from my failings. He will never falter. My children will have to make the decision for themselves as to whether they acknowledge him as their true father, but I have "Faith" that they will and that my father will bring about that faith in them. And my children can listen to my experience, as he has never failed me.

# Vulnerability

*V*oluptuous presentation to men

*Exterior of self is but a cost  
Paid to all regardless of our consent  
Until every shred of interest is lost*

*How cruel is a world where such price exists  
Where all is paid so life can do the same  
But how much worse would be a world distressed  
Where no one accounts the cost of pain?*

*So let not shreds of dignity be marred  
Continue to share your unjaded self  
For the cost you pay can also reward  
When you enrich others with your true wealth*

*Real riches come when you show yourself free  
With vulnerable heart which others see*

I recognize that the word “voluptuous” is typically used in a sexual way. However, it conveys the notion of sensuality (or the senses), which is what I wanted to convey. It seemed like a killer “v” word to start with and I hope the modern connotations don’t keep people from reading it appropriately. The point here is that our physical self is a price we pay daily to all mankind. It’s not something we are able to really keep from others to a large extent. It greets anyone’s senses with whom we come in contact, and they can choose whether or not to devalue that. But as we know from our culture, few people have a wealth built up here. Society has so accosted everyone’s physical image, that even those in Hollywood who have a “beautiful” physique are constantly trying to be better, disguise themselves, etc. While I largely relate to the physical here, this is also true of your social presentation. How you speak with others, how you act, what you share, etc. – it’s all on display, whatever you choose to display. This vulnerability also goes hand in hand with “Beauty,” as being vulnerable generally portrays much more beauty because it is honest and true.

This notion hits on three concepts: 1) Since I’m talking about our image being a cost we pay, I am claiming that all the worth we have here is eventually lost. Every ounce of interest disappears. 2) Eventually, people’s interest in our image goes away. After we’ve been made bankrupt, they leave. Whether their interest is in our beauty or in our ugliness – gazing at us with lust or with contempt – speaking sweet nothings to us or debasing us, men’s interest in our image eventually fade once they have used us how they want to. 3) The final meaning here is hinted at. I attempted to lead the thought up to a point where the reader would feel this concept coming, so when I used the phrase “shred of...” their minds would finish it with “dignity.” Here, “interest” is used synonymously with dignity. However, I wanted to create a money picture to go with the imagery, and I believe interest is a perfect allusion.

It is a cruel world where our riches are exposed for all the world to do with as they please – unguarded, helpless, frail.

But even worse than a world where pain is inflicted so easily, is a world in which pain is not unburdened easily. It would be terrible to live a life where one harbored up pain within themselves, never accounting for it (both a money term and a social term) either in the cost or in the social factor of sharing with others.

So regardless of what people do with your exterior, do not let that jade you to your need for others. There are some who won’t just use you, and you need to be able to share openly with others so they can see real beauty and truth.

The pain inflicted upon you can be used to relate to others. But even more than this, there is a deep wealth which you have. While everyone is distracted by the wealth they see on the surface, they often overlook the true wealth an individual has. Your job is to be unique and throw off your concerns of other’s thoughts, so that your true wealth is guarded. While most attempt to guard their true wealth by being silent and protective of it, that is ironically the worst way to guard it. This alerts people to the storehouse of that wealth where they will bombard it until they open it and destroy it. But if you share of it freely, in an unjaded manner, you can share your riches with others without concern for your true wealth being destroyed as well.

Let others see your true worth. Share yourself and your riches with the world.

# Wisdom

*When three men set out on their journey, only one was wise*

*They all entered into a room with virtue and with vice  
When all three men left the room, only one did so alive  
For only one clung on to life, the others, death disguised*

*Many men who face the choice between life and life of ease  
Waver not from the one they would choose eventually  
And those who life, at first do choose, soon find hard to appease,  
Their screaming lusts which satiate their appetite of greed*

*But some are men of lofty birth who clearly life can see  
Their perspective not darkened out by ignobility  
They always smell the stench of Hell, wherever it is breathed  
And hear the siren's beck'ning song as nothing but caprice*

*Strive to be among lofty men who clearly discern life  
With your senses don't be fooled by every scheming device  
Walk earth as gently as a dove, do not men's wrath entice  
As a serpent crafts his own way, so also you be wise*

I changed up the poem a little to represent a few things. I did this with Wisdom because I believe wisdom is one of the most vital attributes. Love is extremely important as well, but wisdom helps us to know what true love is, how to have love, how to use love, etc. Here I use heptameter (7 stressed/unstressed) rather than pentameter. I also have four complete stanzas of four lines without the general couplet (two lines) at the bottom. I did this for two reasons: 1) 7 is a number of perfection or completeness, so I wanted 7 in here to show how wisdom helps tie all the other attributes together. However, the couplet at the bottom seems incomplete, as it differs from the other three stanzas. Therefore, I tied the couplet up with a finishing two lines. 2) Ecclesiastes 7:4 sums up what I was saying: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure." Wisdom is difficult and involves picking the things that seem less pleasurable and more tiresome. But, wisdom is far better in the long run.

I went with three men to tap into the thought most would be having about 3 wise men. However, the story throws that notion off as we find only one was wise. I also used three men to show that most do not choose wisely. Most lack wisdom, as we can see two chose unwisely and only one chose wisely. The unwise don't realize that the choice between virtue and vice is really the choice between life and death. But death does a good job of concealing itself as pleasure and fulfillment (vice), the unwise can't distinguish it from true life.

Here I continue to use "life" to indicate virtue, but now I use "life of ease" to indicate vice. I do this because living a virtuous life is generally more difficult than living a life of vice. Now a life of vice may make life difficult down the road, but I'm speaking temporarily here. In the moment. And even most men who may want to choose life initially, actually don't. They think through their life and realize that while life may sound good now, they're going to eventually cave to vice. So why not just go with it now?

Then there are those who actually choose life. But they find that choosing life is a daily struggle, as their lusts and greed want to be appeased. Giving into vice seems like the answer to appeasing those desires, although it really only temporarily satisfies them. It is a daily struggle to cling to that life which one first chose.

This ties back into the "Nobility" poem. Wise men are not tainted by ignobility. Rather, they live in nobility in part because they are so discerning.

Wise men are able to discern that which reeks of Hell, and so can avoid it. Likewise, men are able to avoid the beautiful song of the siren's which is pleasant. However, wise men hear this song as caprice (or musically, capriccio). It does not fulfill long term, but is a whim.

Live loftily in wisdom. Don't be fooled with your senses. Be discerning.

Be as gentle as a dove, not harming or provoking anyone. But also be wise like a serpent in your dealings with this world. You will need to be on your toes (or belly) to navigate the treacherous terrain.

# \*Χριστός

(For Kindle on the phone use the smallest text with Baskerville or other small font to see the intended format)

*Enjoy  
promise found  
in him assured by  
Ageless this resurrection Forever  
yet aged just baptised by dwelling with  
for his own glory Χριστός freedoms captured  
is glorifying impassioned finally alive  
mankind loving man tasted in life  
of unheavenly sin  
when death he  
vised*

*EnJoy*  
*PromisE found*  
*In him aSured by*  
*Ageless this resUrrection Forever*  
*yet aged just baptiSed by dwelling with*  
*for his own glory Χριστός freedoms captured*  
*is glorifying impasSioned finally alive*  
*mankind loving mAn tasted in life*  
*of unheaVenly sin*  
*when dEath he*  
*viSed*

*Ageless, yet aged just for his own glory, Christ is glorifying mankind  
Christ, impassioned, loving man, tasted of unheavenly sin, when death he vied  
Enjoy promise found in him, assured by this resurrection, baptized by Christ  
Forever dwelling with Christ, freedoms captured, finally alive in life*



The title of this poem is the center of the poem itself. It is the Greek word for "Christ." I thought this would be a creative way to sneak in the "X," as it's hard to find an "X" word that is meaningful, and to start a poem off with an "X" word. I didn't want to lower myself to the general "eX" work around. Interestingly, then, the most important poem ends up being the "X" one. I stole this format from a poem I wrote earlier, but I liked the concept and thought it would add some importance to this poem. It is a picture of a flower, which throughout Christendom has often symbolized purity and other great characteristics. The picture is also a representative of a cross. While most crosses we think of are taller and not of equal proportions, some celtic crosses we're familiar with are represented in a shorter and stockier manner. One of the largest means of symbolism in this poem is its use of prime numbers to show uniqueness and purity. All lines contain a prime number of symbols and spaces both in the four separate stanzas themselves, the center word by itself, the number of lines counted down from any point (starting on the sides or starting from the very top), and the number of symbols/spaces across. The only exception to this is when double spaced, if you count the spacing in the count. It looks better that way and I'd consider the spacing a formatting issue, but I've done it both ways for technicality's sake. Finally, the very center of the top stanza and the very center of the bottom stanza spell out "Jesus" and "saves" respectively. If you read down, then, using the center of the poem (by letter and space count, not the visual center), it says "Jesus Christ Saves," and this internal message within the message makes the shape of a more traditional cross within the larger cross.

One other noteworthy aspect of this poem lies in its relation to the other poems in this series. This is the only other poem, besides "Unique," that is not a sonnet in any form. But it goes beyond that in the way it is structured as a picture. It also doesn't have an exhortation like the rest, though the upper petal could be read as such. But the exhortation overall is really the whole poem itself. It's a poem that's meant to encompass an immense number of facets. This poem is the gospel, which is an exhortation in and of itself to make Christ the Lord of one's life.

Note: When reading the poem, you must use the center word in the poem to make each stanza complete. The interpretation of order and reading is at the bottom of the poem, written in the normal format.

1<sup>st</sup> Stanza: The poem is meant to be read starting from the left. The backwards pointing leaf points towards the past, so I talk about God's eternal past and his choosing to enter into time in the past, and a particular point of entry at his birth. He never aged, but was eternal, yet he chose to age in human flesh for his own glory. And his utmost glory was brought about by his glorifying of men. This does not mean he glorified men over God or worshipped man, but that he brought many sons to glory.

2<sup>nd</sup> Stanza: The second stanza is pointing down, and thus represents Christ's death and burial. Jesus Christ of heaven, tasted sin – the opposite of heaven's true life – in his squeezing out every last drop of death from the world's sponge. I picture Christ being handed the sponge with pain reliever while on the cross. Instead of squeezing that into his mouth, he bore every last drop of death and sin for us.

3<sup>rd</sup> Stanza: This stanza points up, and thus represents Christ's resurrection and victory over sin. We have a promise of life everlasting in which ~~that~~ we can rest assured ~~in~~ due to Christ being the first fruits of our own resurrection. He resurrected, and has baptized us with his Holy Spirit so we will taste of the same resurrection. His resurrection and the spirit that lives within us are our guarantee of our resurrection to come. This notion of baptism and seal of the Spirit is also vital, as it symbolizes not only Christ's role in sacrificing, but also of his intercession for us, the application of Christ's sacrifice and his preparation of a place for us is brought about by his intercession for us (both necessary roles to fulfill to be a perfect high priest). Here I use the British rendering of "baptize," as I needed that "s" for my own subliminal purposes.

4<sup>th</sup> Stanza: The fourth stanza points to the right, and thus our future in eternity with Christ. The whole work of Christ from eternity past was to glorify himself. He did this by working to capture or secure us to himself. While that language sounds like bondage, it is our true freedom which we will be able to experience forever because of his work. Christ has captured our freedoms and affections that were wayward, and helped us to see what true life is, and what our true desires and fulfillment are and should be. We will finally have true life in eternity, and it will last forever because of our savior who secured it. This is not a captivity of freedom, but rather a captivation of it.

While each stanza has its petal pointing in a different direction, due to their shape, each petal also points in towards the center. So while each petal shows its own individual concept, each one also points to the central theme of Christ.

# Youthfulness

*Y*our age is just a number, not your life

*It measures what is gone, not what there is  
And those who find they have less time alive  
Should time reverse, lest they not truly live*

*So with the years that you now have to spend  
Hoard them not for want of what you now know  
Nor waste them on frivolous, darkened ends  
Life not planted, or life that will not grow*

*Be barren not, then, in the life you have  
Bear fruit always, as years your roots accrue  
And fret not for death's storm that will attack  
Rather, live always as if in your youth*

*The sting of death lies in exalting life  
And death itself in not exalting light*

Age doesn't really mean anything. I've met 80+ year olds who were more alive than teenagers. Most if it comes down to perspective and choice. So if someone says they're 80, it doesn't mean they only have a small percentage of life left. They can have 100% of life for the rest of the life they live, though their lives may not last as long as someone who has lived less years. So if you find yourself up in years, it doesn't mean you're down in life. You choose how you spend the rest of that life, and if you don't respect time, you'll end up wasting what you have left to spend.

Hording your years – as if you could save them up – (or living safely) because of the unknowns of the future isn't really living. Neither is wasting the life you have on frivolity and empty, vices. Life horded is like seeds that are not planted. They cannot grow into anything if not planted. Likewise, life thrown away on frivolous ends is like a seed planted in the dark, where it will never grow, as there is no light to nourish it.

So don't be barren either by not planting at all, or by planting in a bad environment. Bear fruit, and do so by living in the light as long as possible. Be nourished and plant roots. The deeper you grow the more life you will have. But don't let your age diminish the amount of fruit you bear.

So don't fear death as you age. Don't fear the storm that can snap your limbs, or the rot that can accrue. Rather, live as if you are youthful and have limber limbs. Live as if you are in your youth bearing baskets of healthy fruit.

The pain of death isn't in death itself. Once you're dead, you're dead. The pain of death lies in our experiencing of the death of others, and our fear of our own death. While disdain for death is appropriate, we often overly exalt life. Again, life is valuable, but when we place such a high value on our physical lives, when we think that's what is so important, it causes death to truly sting. But death itself is a result of not exalting light, and thus true life. So an exhortation to embrace youthfulness is one that calls you to live a life where you don't fear death, where you embrace the light, and where you live life to the fullest. Explore, travel, and embrace this life you have to live in the light.

# Zeal

*Z*enith of life passes over the Earth  
Over us all, each and every the same  
Poor greet the sight at the moment of birth  
And wicked, the day their souls reach the flames

*But some, their souls are headed for greatness  
As life they live fights on for what is good  
And pinnacle of their lives is success  
In showing world what a world could*

*So life you have, live it with passion great  
Let birth nor death be that which doth define  
Embrace a life that grabs a hold of fate  
Letting go only when the stars align*

*Invade the world with unrelenting zeal  
Leaving nothing to chance upon fate's wheel*

All mankind has a high point. For many who just go through life, the high point of their life is that they received life at all. They do nothing with their life. Others are so utterly wicked, that the greatest good of their life is their utter demise and destruction as they greet justice in the flames.

But some are able to live lives of passion as they fight for greatness. Their greatness sets an example to the world. It shows the world what it could be and what it should be.

So live your life with passion and don't live it frivolously or wickedly.

Don't allow the natural parts of life you can't control be those which define you. Rather, grab a hold of your life and live it in zeal as you shape your own life. Only let go when you cause your stars to align. Normally, the notion of the stars aligning shows the notion of fate, but here you are causing the stars to align. You are controlling the aligning of the stars as you control your zenith.

Go out into the world and attack it and your future with zeal and passion. Leave nothing to happenings, but take control of your own life.

Atticus's 123's

# \*Zero

The distance spanned between our love and you  
Time in which you have not been known in mind  
Days you will see where hope's conquered by rue  
Inches you'll travel destitute and blind

Miles you'll move in silence, void song's retort  
Roads leading you to roam, or to your loss  
Seasons through which you will pass without warmth  
Fields left empty in sunshine, hearths in frost

'ours spent bemoaning unrequited love  
Minutes in which you wonder what you're worth  
Seconds of doubt dwelling on life above  
Moments of joy expunged with you from Earth

Days without our blessing that you will go  
Life without One who can make all this so



All statements here look back to the idea of zero. There will be 0 days without this, or minutes without that. I don't really expect that all of these things will occur. But as a father, they are the most idealistic hopes I can have for my children, as I think about how the world should be, and hope for the world the way it one day will be.

All three stanzas have a 3-2-1 aspect to them. Since "0" as we know it was missing from numbers for most of history, I wanted to acknowledge it and pay homage to it even though it's called learning your "1,2,3's," not "0,1,2's." Since zero is often viewed as something missing, or it's the ultimate number reached when counting backwards to an event, I thought I'd make my stanzas reminiscent of a backwards flow. In the first stanza, this reverses faith, hope, and love, so that we have love, hope, and faith represented. The first two lines talk about how our children have always been loved, and loved deeply. Every event in our lives has brought us up to this moment.

And while our progeny may not have always been at the forefront of our mind, everything we've done has led to them. Even if this is me imposing my current love and emotion onto past events, I believe that helps to tie life events together. For instance, fathers can say that the birth of their child was the happiest day of their lives, even though they love their children more and more as they grow. Even though their future love is greater than their initial love, that future love can be imposed back on the day of their child's birth and infused into the meaning of that moment, because that was the moment that led to their current love, and it was a/the moment that began that love. Likewise, I think I can say that our children were always in our mind, even though I know that they were not in a literal sense. The third line obviously deals with hope, and the fourth deals with a faith for provisions (consider the lilies of the field), though faith is not explicitly mentioned.

This stanza focuses on a farming 3-2-1. Here we have a farmer traveling to the market at the end of the growing season, then I'll speak about seasons, and then about fields (implying planting or working). First, while all roads may lead to Rome, I wish that no roads will lead my children to roam. When I think about moving through miles and song responding, I think about those Disney movies where someone is moving through life so wondrously, that song can't help but play. I desire that my kids have the sound of music playing as they go through life. I hope song can't help but sound with their movements. I think part of that comes by having purposed movement. It doesn't mean there is no wandering in the sense of adventure and openness, but rather it pushes against the idea of an aimlessness.

The 3-2-1 here is hours, minutes, seconds, and moments. The time periods get shorter as we move back. I want my children to know love in full and to not feel the unresponsiveness and callousness of unrequited love, not just in a romantic sense, but in general human love. I never want my children to doubt their worth or the intrinsic worth and for others, and I never want them to doubt the love of their God and their love for God. I believe these concepts are inextricably linked, as we are image bearers with souls who derive our value not from matter, but from the immaterial, eternal stamp of our divine creator. And lastly, I want full lives for my children, so they can both experience joy and bring joy to others. I desire no moment on earth to be without them.

In all of this longing and hope, the only thing I can really guarantee is that my children will have my blessing. While all of the above are desires and wishes I have for my children, they are largely not things I can bring about. It is only God who can ensure these things, should he see fit to do so. And while these are all things I wish for my children, as they are the way things should be if we were not in a cursed and fallen world, I understand that for the best outcome in their lives, in the lives of those they touch, and in the fight to push back against the curse – some, many, or all of these wishes may not be fulfilled. I'm ok with that, as I trust God. However, I want my children to know the love we have for them, the desires we have for them to live in a perfect and fixed world, and the God who is able to make those things true for their lives, and will make those things true eventually. Ultimately, it is a trust in God that I want my children to have above all, so one day all my wishes for my children will come true.

Time is, in one sense, counting down (represented in this particular poem) towards eternity and towards full redemption. In another sense, it is counting up (represented in the ascending numbers of the compilation as a whole), as Christ's kingdom is established, and as the curse is being pushed back. There is nothing more I can wish for my children than that they share in the same hope we do, and that they experience my blessed wish – the world as it should be.

# One

**One** heart you have from which your passions flow  
And passions, that, which all your actions, guide  
This heart the part of you that others know  
Its healthy beat, feat which brings you to life

One soul whose role's to fill essence's hole  
As action fashioned sans substance is naught  
Its goal, extol the call which makes one whole  
Its source divorced not from maker who wrought

One mind behind the never ending quest  
To find truth aligned with all that's real  
To subjugate and abate dissonance  
To sate the spate of darkness's appeal

Heart, soul, and mind all pine to truly live  
The way, the life - to truth a supplicant

“One” focuses on “the One” (God), and our unity with him, as our substance and being (mind, soul, and heart) come together as distinct components or features (depending on if you’re a dichotomist or trichotomist, but that’s not at all my point here. I’m not making any claims in that department). Here I speak of how we are one, even though we are segmented in certain ways. In a sense, then, this alludes to the trinity in some ways, as God is three and one. One was also alluded to in the last line of the poem “Zero.” Here, the One is fleshed out and described. Also, the frequent rhyming of the poem gives a heartbeat sort of feel, which is appropriate here talking about the heart and what makes life tick.

Each poem from here on out will have the number used as the first word in its respective line. “Zero” wasn’t used anywhere in the last poem, as zero is an absence of number. One is now used in the first line, two will be used in the second line of the following poem, etc. So not only are the “1,2,3’s” counting in title, but are actually showing their value by counting up the lines in each subsequent poem. Our heart is the part of us which guides our actions. From our hearts flow our desires, and from desire, action. We embrace and act upon that which we are most passionate.

They say that “actions speak louder than words.” We can say whatever we will, but it is our actions that show our true selves to others, as they are an outward reflection of an inward contemplation. But our contemplative self is inert, and only truly comes to life when it is put to the test of real action. When we act, others see our true lives - who we truly are. Our heart, then, makes us alive in three ways. First, it keeps us physically alive with its movement of blood throughout our bodies. Second, its passions make us alive in the sense of action, as they pulsate out from our emotive self and move us from inert inaction to decision and action. Finally, our heart has the ability to make us alive with true, everlasting life, if it has a healthy beat whose passions are aligned with ultimate reality. This is why despite the oft problematic cliché of having Christ live in our hearts, I think that’s exactly what must happen for one to be a true Christian who experiences a transformed life, as one’s passions are changed from the inside out by the indwelling of God himself. James is a perfect book to read on this subject, as he says that “faith without works is dead,” and goes on to describe the source of our evil, the deceitfulness of our hearts even to ourselves, and the need for transformation from the inside out.

But heart, without soul, would be nothing. The trees obey God and the laws of nature as well, but we would not ascribe anything profound or significant to their action. They just act. It is the soul, however, that gives substance to our action. We are image bearers of God who contain immeasurable value and duty. Just as word without deed or idea without implementation is vacuous or meaningless, so our action without our image bearing soul would make us devoid of the great meaning and substance our soul provides.

Our soul, then, calls our heart’s passions into submission to our true calling. Our substance determines what our passions and actions should be. Because we are the image bearers of God, our passions and actions should align with that.

Just as the rocks and trees obey without substance, they also obey without volition or discernment. Our mind is a major component that provides us with the ability to choose, to weigh decisions and passions, etc. While our mind can be tricked, it’s overarching goal should be to discern true reality in order to help direct our actions and passions towards that which most accurately and fully aligns with who we are – an image bearing substance from the divine.

Living in a fallen and darkened world, it is then our mind’s goal to push back against the darkness into which we were born. Here, darkness conveys both the meaning of ignorance, as well as the notion of our original sin and birth into the bondage of sin’s utter moral darkness and despair. We are called to push back against the curse, and we must use our mind’s attaining of both natural and spiritual knowledge to do so. And we must do this amidst the overwhelming and torrential rain and subsequent flooding of darkness that perpetually pushes through the opening of our mind, against the walls of our heart, in an attempt to accost and corrode the very foundation of our being - our soul. We must constantly push back against our soul’s degradation and damnation, which is our own doing.

All three of our components which make up who we are, create value and true life. Many get this wrong, and think true life is a continued physical existence of self-absorption. Our heart seeks to be forever satisfied in its passions, our souls seek to be fulfilled by meaningfulness, and our minds seek to know all that the world holds. And while most attempt to satiate these things with the very thing that attacks true life - the darkness - true life can only be found in reality. The way, the truth, and the life found in the last line correspond to Christ's message that he is the way the truth and the life. But here, I don't overtly mention Christ. I say that the way and the life come through being a servant to truth, or a correspondence with reality (we can argue if that's a good definition of truth, but it's the way I use it here). I say this because aligning our actions and beliefs with truth (God is real, Christ is the only way, we are image bearers, etc.) is the very thing that leads us to true life. It acknowledges what true life is, who we really are, and acknowledges that Christ is Lord and we are his brothers. That is truth, that is reality, and it is for that which all of us long. It seems more and more that the Western world is trending towards creating our own reality – a byproduct, I think, of a growing unholy marriage of a naturalistic mindset that emphasizes humans as subjects, as well as the influence of Eastern religions and their notions that completely undermine any notion of truth (like throwing off the law of non-contradiction). So now, we believe that true life is making up whatever fiction suits us best, calling it reality, and expecting everyone to play along. Rather, Christianity calls us to seek truth, find grounding, and comport with reality. Only the latter will lead to true happiness and fulfillment now, and when the curtain closes on the act.

# Two

Your heart, your mind, your soul, the whole of you  
**Two** lives they live, one here and one beyond  
One lusting after sweet temporal food  
The other recognizing One true God

One's representation then comes in twos  
The soul, with eyes to see all that there is  
The mind with ears to hear all spoken truths  
The heart with hands to act on its passions

But one can't sustain two lives – one must die  
As flesh thrives on self, grace on selflessness  
And those with lives confined to space and time  
Have one life to pursue – one life to live

You're an immortal living in the flesh  
Death of self, path to life truly expressed

“Two” takes the concept from “One,” and builds upon it. While we as a person are one entity, even though we are composed of parts in some sense, our one person lives in two. We are an individual living two lives. One life lived is here, and one life lived is “beyond.” Just as the first line of the “One” poem begins with the word “one,” so this poem’s second line begins with the word “two.”

This second part of the stanza points out the two lives we live. One life is focused on that which is here, now, and passing – or temporal – and the other focuses on that which is eternal, and on the true One from which we derive this true life and essence.

This whole stanza deals then with that duality. Our hearts, souls, and minds all have physical counterparts. Our eyes can see that which is physical and/or carnal, but our mind’s eye can also be used to perceive the true essence of things. Our ears can be used to pick out facts and knowledge or perceived facts about the physical world, but our ability to pause and listen can also be used to dwell on ultimate, non-physical knowledge and truths (e.g. moral, mathematical, logical, etc.). Finally, our hearts can use our hands and feet to fill its immediate passions, or it can use it to act out that which is eternally rewarding, namely the helping of and caring for others. These same senses are also often our downfall, as they represent the lust of the flesh (hands/feet), the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (hearing what we want the truth to be).

The Bible is clear that man cannot serve two masters. While the Bible also counters gnostic notions that the body or physical things are bad, nature has now been corrupted by sin which reigns in it. We must then die to our carnal and sinful self, and live unto the grace which has saved us, seeking the redemption of the body and physical realm to perfection as was originally intended. Here, “grace” is synonymous with “spirit,” as grace is the means whereby we obtain the Spirit. In the first line of this stanza, I also point to a clear picture of how this grace must come – “one must die.” This points both to the death of Christ for us so that grace could be known, as well as to the death of ourselves as grace begins its reign in us as new men and women.

It is actually through the death of our carnal self that we truly live. Even though one of us dies, one must die ultimately. If we allow our spiritual self to die (or remain dead), we will have but one, temporary, unfulfilled life to live. However, if our carnal self dies, we allow the life lived to be that of our spiritual self, which will live eternally, in a redeemed, physical body. Even though each has one life to live, the quality and length of each of those lives is far different.

The way our true selves are expressed or seen is through a death to self. This is a life that shines through, unrepressed and undisfigured by the marring of sin. This is not to say that the body is bad and the spirit is good. Rather, the poem bemoans a fallen self. We need a death to our flesh so we can live holistically – redeemed body and soul.

# Three

A life devoid of life's no life at all  
A life that ends in death is much the same  
**Three** decades our savior lived life in full  
Three days he took to overcome the grave

Your life's not merely this temporal one -  
A life absent of hope, as future fades  
Rather, this life is full of living sun  
As day leads one unto another day

So days we have, we live them all in threes  
Morning refreshed to well be on our way  
Noon day with light shined on the lives we lead  
Evening, reflecting, resting for new day

Our lives lived full as we are filled with hope  
Each new day reminder of life invoked

This concept continues from the last poem, as it calls for a death to self. But here, it seems like I'm recanting, as I say death makes life pointless. However, the first line means that a life devoid of true life, or fullness, is not really life. And the second line shows that a temporal life that has an ending point is not really that which fulfills. So in reality, this ends up affirming the previous poem, which speaks of death to the temporal and fleeting and an embracing of the eternally lasting as that which fulfills.

Christ showed us that a life could be lived fully, and this meaningful life could have perpetual, lasting meaning, as he conquered death and lives eternally.

Hope is based on the notion that something good comes to fruition. However, rather than anticipation building up to something great, life is the opposite, as we are whittling away unto death. As Lecrae says, we're just "breathing to death." The future is not bright if this life is all we have. The future ends in cold darkness for us, as well as all our progeny, and eventually all of the universe.

This sentence conveys illumination, hope, warmth, and joy. Illumination comes as we see our true calling, and our purpose as human beings, as represented and proclaimed by our savior. Our hope comes as our savior has promised us that we too will conquer the grave through him, and we have a full, eternal future ahead of us. The warmth comes in the love that is bestowed upon us by our savior – a particular love that should be distinguished from the common grace given to everyone. Finally, the joy comes as the son's rising provides us redemption from our sin, fallen state, hopelessness, imminent death and damnation.

With all the vampire movies that have come out in the past few decades, there's a misconception that a never-ending life would be horrendous. The immortals who have lived ages always say that it's a curse. However, this is usually for two reasons. First, the historic vampires don't really experience pleasure from actions like eating and such. Living without any pleasure seems depressing. But all immortals talk about the other reason, which is that everyone they love dies. Their lack of decay does not prevent the decay of all they love. Here I am dismissing Stephanie Meyer's bastardized version of vampirism, and going more with the core as represented by movies like "Interview with the Vampire." Though even Meyer has Edward acknowledge vampirism as a curse due to his loss of loved ones. Our hope of everlasting life is the opposite. We will be freed from sin and guilt, freed from death, decay, and destruction, and we will be living in the one perfect place - in the presence of the one being who can and will completely fulfill our pleasures, in a redeemed body, with restored relationships. This is a blessing, not a curse.

This paragraph represents each new 24-hour day, but is also alluding to our lives (birth/younger years, adulthood, elderly).

So how can we live our lives to the fullest now, knowing that our redemption is not now, but rather awaits us? We live it freely as we are not bound to death and destruction – though we will experience those things. We also live knowing that we have a hope of perfection that has been secured for us. While we may experience death, it is not the end. While all our work on earth will be undone, what we do impacts the eternal souls of others. How I invest my time and resources is an eternal decision, not a temporal one. While my actions are initiated in time, they are initiated by and towards beings who will see no end to time. How frivolous and hopeless, then, does the mantra "Carpe Diem" seem? Cease just one day? Cease just a series of days? No thank you. I will cease eternity. (For more on the absurdity of life without God, see William Lane Craig's book, "On Guard," or check out my synopsis of his chapter here: <http://dckreider.weebly.com/blog-theological-musings/the-absurdity-of-life-without-god> ).



## \* Four

Strong walls that stand do not a castle make  
Nor moat that lies, surrounding from outside  
As none can live where all are kept away  
**For** king and liege are naught where none reside

All fabricated hindrances ward off  
Life which a home's intended to embrace  
Their grandeur warning vagrants to stay lost  
Ramshackled ruins leave tourists amazed

A home then's not a place where rulers are  
Nor place where walls stretch high into the air  
A home is where bridges are drawn for hearts  
And banners fly, uniting all who're there

A home's not where inhabitants are safe  
A home's the most loving, welcoming place

This poem plays off the phrase “king of the castle.” While many think of one’s home as a castle, here I am pushing back against the notion of dominion or rulership. It’s not that rulers are bad – in fact they are necessary. But when people use this phrase, it’s generally conveying a notion of “stay off the grass,” or used in conversations where people talk about how they’d have no problem shooting an intruder. It’s MINE. My domain. My stuff. But even if we were talking about rulers here, if a ruler is all about themselves and has nobody with whom to reside, who are they ruling but themselves? There is no such thing as a ruler in an evacuated castle. Ironically, then, those who set themselves up in a domain unto themselves end up being neither ruler, or at home.

When I think of castles, I think of two types. The first type is a grand castle in its time of construction, or a large castle that still stands. I imagine what a passerby may have thought when they saw the towering walls and fortifications in the distance. While it may have conveyed safety to those familiar with the area, it most likely looked terrifying and awesome (in its literal sense). I imagine it did not look very inviting, as the point of castles has rarely been to appeal. Sure, structures within the castle were made to look lovely, and I’m sure they were adorned with some aesthetics in mind, but the main goal of the castle was to keep others out, and keep safe those within. The second type of castle is the one with which most firsthand experiences come today. It’s the castle whose walls have succumbed to the siege and breaching of an enemy long ago, or to the passage of time and the elements. It is a place in ruins. We know how great it must have been at one time, and we know its intended purpose, but it is now neither great nor useful. It is utterly decimated, and lives and serves only in the imagination of a curious historian.

While a home can certainly be a home with rulers, and while a home can certainly have fortifications, those two things don’t make a home. Whereas a castle seems to be largely defined by those two things in our current culture, I want to push back against our phraseology when dealing with the home, because I don’t think those should be at the forefront of our minds. Even biblical homes, where there is a leadership structure, are homes where leadership is done not by being an overbearing dictator, but by being an inviter to participate in love as the leader dies to self. This is servant-leadership, self-sacrifice, and welcoming love.

Rather than just tear down the modern notion of a home, I want to build up what I believe should most define a home. I believe it should be welcoming and uniting. First, a home should allow others in. We tend to think of homes now as immediate family, often just parents and children – at least until the children turn 18, at which point home becomes a cruise ship and wherever our retirement money takes us. Home in our culture tends to be very self-centered. We don’t have the extended family homes that much of the world has, and I think that has a negative impact on our view of family. Furthermore, our modern notion of hospitality is atrocious. People rarely invite others into their “home,” we run from getting to know people on a deep level, and God forbid a stranger or a friend of a friend needs assistance or a place to stay. We are not a welcoming culture. Many even treat their own families like crap, whether it be the neglected spouse as we throw money and time at our vicarious achievements through our kids, or our neglected kids as we are too busy fighting with our spouse because we want things to be done our way.

The second notion that defines a home is its ability to unite. Not only should people be welcome in a home (not just immediate family), but those who come into the home need to feel united. The homekeepers are advocates for each other. Everyone should be able to be candid, knowing that even if feelings are hurt or disagreements acknowledged, they are all united in their love for and dedication to each other.

While a home should be safe in certain senses, a home that is made safe by keeping most out and dictating to those within is not a home, and certainly not one worthy of defending. A home like that need not be attacked, as its walls will not be maintained, for none will replace the subjects who die or leave, and no subjects will be there to repair the walls as they fall to time and neglect. This “home” is self-destructive and fruitless. If walls define a home, they can be torn down. If openness defines a home, only a choice to erect defenses and rulers without bridges and banners can stop it.

# \*Five

While senses are common to all mankind  
Common sense, yet, seems to be rather sparse  
Latter making one reveal the divine  
Former true of evolute's patriarchs

**Five** senses list'ning to siren's sweet lips  
My child, please don't be bound to what you see  
Run from the stench of clothes hellfire's licked  
Don't follow feelings of what ought not be

For one who follows in ancestor's crawl  
Is only able to give what he gets  
The here, the now, the moment – that is all  
All that was, now replaced by what there is

But you, my child, spark of divinity  
Let's weigh the truth as you reason with me

Logic and reason distinguish mankind from the other animals. Whereas every creature has some sort of physical sense, none has a rational sense even close to mankind. This seems to be an evidence for our souls created in the image of God. I'm not ready to say that animals don't have souls, but our souls are definitely distinct.

Many creatures through history past have had physical senses. Here I am not making commentary on evolution. Rather, I'm just pointing out that regardless of one's belief, mankind is clearly distinct. We have the breath of God. The word "evolute" is used here in a double entendre way. First, it is meant to convey the evolutionary sense, as I take on that position for the argument. Assuming only common ancestry apart from the divine, all we as humans can draw from that is that we are indistinguishable from animals. We are all just a compilation of matter and senses. If we have simply arrived on the scene by unguided processes, what do we have to inherit but mechanistic action and instinct? Second, only with divine input, humanity is the evolute of the circle of life. An evolute of a circle tends to be a diamond in shape (more like a hypocycloid rather than a diamond). We are a diamond in the rough, certainly unique, and too unique for me to consider it a coincidence, and is evidence of the divine in us.

The first two lines start to bring in the five senses. The first line in this stanza talks about seeing, and the second line talks about hearing and tasting. I used the apostrophe in the word "listening" so that the first part of the word becomes "list." This serves, then, as a double meaning. Listening to the siren's song and focusing on their sweet lips – being bound only to what is present or what we see – causes us to list. The sirens of old were said to lure sailors in with their mesmerizing beauty and song, only to lead the sailors into shipwreck. The listing of a ship, then, is linked here with the sirens, and used to convey this physicalist path as one which will lead a life to list as well. Using only your five senses (sight and hearing in the siren example) leads to a life shipwrecked. Without immaterial discernment (the mind and spirit), life is murky at the least.

A sole reliance on the senses tends to lead one to two different materialisms. The first is a materialism that says that matter or the physical is all there is. That leads us to this notion that the senses are all we can use to determine truth. The second form of materialism it leads to is one in which we value goods and immediate pleasures, or the hoarding of wealth. If all that exists is matter, and matter's state is shifting, eventually moving towards ultimate entropy, then live it up now. But these viewpoints are evil and vacuous. The term "hellfire" here is used with Jude in mind. Jude 1:18-23 says: "In the last times there will be scoffers who follow their own ungodly desires." These are the people who divide you, **who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit**. But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you **eternal life**. Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by **snatching them from the fire**." Those who delve in materialism and physicalism do so at the risk of their own soul. It ultimately leads to an elevation of man (ironically, as it has nowhere near the basis to do so as Christianity does), a devaluation or dismissal of the Spirit, and a belief in only the temporal and present rather than a hopeful eternity. We must turn away from that which has come in contact with such things, and pull those we can from the abyss.

If we really only follow in our ancestor's steps (on a materialistic evolutionary assumption), or crawl – since most ancestors were crawling or on all fours – then all we have in common is our use of the physical senses. We are just animals as they are (like Bloodhound Gang sang in "Bad Touch." You and me baby, we ain't nothing but mammals...).

So if we really do follow from our ancestors, we are mechanistic, reactionary creatures that only detect and respond physically. Intention disappears, as there is nothing but reactive dominos. So if I inherit my attributes from my ancestors, and they are only mechanistic, material blobs of chemical reaction, how can I ascribe any more value – or any value at all – to my actions? Well, I guess I can ascribe whatever value I want (or I should say whatever values nature has determined me to have), but my, what a massive fiction that is. This line says a lot about what becomes of love, altruism, mercy, grace, morals, etc.

So if all this materialism and physicalism is true, then all that truly exists is now. Sure, the future will come, but what is my concern for the future? I want the world to be good for my progeny? Why? There certainly is no higher moral saying that this should be. Rather, it's just the oxytocin levels in my body, or maybe the dopamine. If that

makes me feel good, I suppose I can do it, but all that concerns me is my existence and my pleasure. Now a physicalist may argue that we have memories and thoughts and hopes about the future, but I would argue that they are jumping on the immaterial bandwagon there, stealing what my system can offer that their system cannot. I will explain at the end.

All we experience is swallowed by the sands of time and replaced by what we can sense now [see poem "Time's March of Madness"]. The molecular state that existed in the past has now changed. That is an observation to which value cannot be ascribed. Molecules move and change and react. So what? Let the naturalist give me all the descriptions he wants, but as soon as he offers groundless prescription, he betrays his worldview and philosophy.

This is an allusion to the idea of a "ghost in the machine," which is often used pejoratively, but I use it positively here. It's also a nerdy videogame reference pointing to Guilty Spark in Halo, which is very reminiscent of a "ghost" in Destiny, which brings people to life. So we are more than matter. We are immaterial soul as well.

Is the materialist to reason with me? If his worldview is right, he cannot, for reason does not exist in a deterministic, mechanistic world. I can only say what all the actions and reactions in my body cause, and he can only respond in kind. Materialism says that existence is matter, but here I speak of truth as something that exists in reality. I use the phrase "weigh the truth" to poke fun at the materialist who has to agree with me about truth's existence, yet cannot according to his own standards. For if truth really exists, surely it can be weighed, as matter has physical properties. Let me provide an example I'm stealing from Greg Kokul to prove the color blue is not physical (though it can be stimulated by physical processes). While the physicalist would say the color blue is caused by light, this is demonstrably false. We can close our eyes and picture the color blue. But if we were to open up your head while doing this, would we find the color blue in there? Not at all. So where is the color blue? We can't say that the color blue is a synapse firing, though our neurons or brain may stimulate us to perceive the color. I, many philosophers, and many mathematicians would argue that the immaterial world exists in the form of abstract objects – numbers being a prime (pun intended) example. For language to exist and for us to grasp concepts beyond an action/reaction level, it can be reasonably argued that the immaterial must exist in the form of abstract objects. So for the materialist/physicalist who denies the immaterial, they are in a bind of contradiction, borrowing freedoms and abilities from competing worldviews, and spewing meaninglessness as they can't avoid the inevitability of the ball and chain ramifications of a mechanistic world and self.

# Six

The world is God's, so watch and tend and keep  
The world is theirs, so live life to appease  
The world is mine, so take all I can reap  
The world is ours, legacies we must leave

Man throughout hist'ry has value assigned  
**Six** the sign of man and thrice of the beast  
The sign with which most choose to self, align  
One for self, one, unholy trinity

But men, the ones formed – fashioned from the dust  
One day, once again to dust shall return  
Cold molecules thrown in space to be lost  
As stars, which once they were, again shall burn

The mark of man is God's supremacy  
Mark of the beast death and frivolity

This stanza shows the transition from Eden where we were family with God, working to maintain and advance the garden, to present day. The second phase of history shown is where man attempted to appease the gods or nature. The third phase is where man had a free for all and did whatever pleased himself. The final phase shows man elevating humanity as a whole rather than any or every individual human. While all aspects can be seen at all times (except the bad aspects in Eden), I feel that this is fairly representative of worldviews throughout history.

Whether man acknowledges it or not, intrinsic value has been placed upon all from the beginning. But this phrase doesn't only mean that value has been assigned to mankind, but also that mankind has always tried to assign value to things. The things to which man tends to ascribe value often seem to be self-serving. When sacrificing to the gods, it was for appeasement and blessing. When sacrificing to self, it was for personal pleasure. When sacrificing to humanity, it's to take control and be gods, leaving "eternal" legacies through progeny.

Man's sign, or the sign assigned to him is "6." Man was created on the sixth day. Interestingly, the sign of the beast is the sign of man three times.

Most men take on both of those signs today. They take on the sign of man which is about self. But then they also take on the sign of the beast, which I am using here to be humanism. It is all humanity together. The focus on humanity as the goal and that which is the greatest goal is an usurping of God. At least when one is self-focused, delusions of being a messiah are fairly infrequent. You just want to get stuff. But humanism is a view of man that elevates him as messiah. This is why I call the mark of the beast or humanism the unholy trinity, as it attempts to set itself up as self-sufficient, self-sustaining god. And just as God is thrice holy, so the beast is thrice unholy.

Man was created from the dust regardless of your view of his formation. God either shaped him or he came from stardust, as atheist physicist Lawrence Krauss says. So if we assume that man was formed naturalistically, then man came from stardust. On the naturalistic viewpoint, the ultimate end of it all is a heat death, or a cold universe. All molecules will be torn apart and sent into utter darkness and oblivion as entropy runs its course. But on the spiritual view, man still returns to dust physically, but like the hot stars naturalists believe we came from, men who deny God and elevate man will return to a state of heat as they burn in their separation from God and good. While I'm not exactly sure what that will be like, I love C.S. Lewis's explanation of Hell. Hell is a place locked from the inside. Rather than God sending individuals unwillingly, he rather walks away and leaves them to their own desires, and the consequences of such a life and such a world without his gracious and merciful pursuit. He leaves men to their own devices and schemes – which is the worst Hell one could ever create, and is created by man himself. While on naturalism men may have come from stars and been the self-proclaimed stars while alive, all they will have left to show in the afterlife is their burning in seclusion – a burning of both unappeasable and false desires, and a burning of separation from that which could ever soothe and fulfill.

The mark of man is not inherently bad. Recognizing our mark for what it is, is life. Understanding that God is our creator, and that we are creations is important. Six is important because it's a mark of our subservience to the one who created us. But taking that and running with it to elevate ourselves or humanity just leads to death and meaninglessness, both as we live this life, and after we enter the next.

# Seven

Day passes on to day as new arrives  
Refreshing, beginning all life anew  
As hope's awakened by morning's sunrise  
And life empowered by what rest's imbued

But all this hope and all this life are vain  
For where does hope lie in repetition?  
**Seven** days all repeat, all named the same  
All toil empty, ending in flagration

But work, we know, is not a fallen curse  
Nor week creator formed something not good  
But we, created creatures, form our worth  
From dust, from hay, from stubble, and from wood

A day only brings hope if there is more  
And works meaning only if they endure



Days repeat, and the processes in them repeat. The sun comes up initiating a new day, and our eyes open from rest preparing us to live life in a new day.

But if we rest and refresh simply to rinse and repeat, then what's the point? It's like Groundhog Day. Resting should refresh us for something new, for the accomplishment of the hope we had yesterday. But really, rest just refreshes us to do the same thing again as days repeat.

Every day repeats each week. All our deeds will end in flagration, or burning (conflagration). This has a quadruple meaning. First, it is the burning of the body and the muscles as it goes through the toils of life. Second, it is the representation of the burning and yearning for more than monotony and pointlessness – a desire for fulfillment and meaning. Third, it represents the destruction of all our vain toiling as the world's end is going to be destruction, regardless of one's worldview. Finally, the conflagration here represents our works being judged by fire at the end of time.

We know that work was given in the beginning prior to the curse. Work is something that is good, and something that should satisfy and provide us with pleasure and fulfillment. And we also know that when God created the world, he said after each day that it was good, so how could the repetition of work and days be so bad?

The vanity, then, comes not from the creation itself, but from what the creatures have done to the creation to defile it. And men, creatures of the dust, take the invaluable, intrinsic worth instilled by God, and glory in the creation itself instead. Men glory in the creation and the works geared towards that which they choose to value. Rather than acknowledging value, we attempt to create it. And what happens to those values we create? The hay and stubble are burned up. This is by no means condemning the arts. In fact, the arts are a perfect place for individuals to recognize beauty and intrinsic value, and bring those nuances out for others to see and enjoy.

Rather, the problem comes when we build up certain things to be the end for our pleasure and enjoyment rather than a means. For instance, God intended sex to be enjoyed and to accentuate and deepen a particular type of relationship. Sex for as its own end is deviating from the created order, is not lasting, and makes it into more than it is. The relationship is what is lasting and truly meaningful. Sex is simply a means to build the relationship. C.S. Lewis has a great section in one of his books: "You can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act—that is, to watch a girl undress on the stage. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? And would not anyone who had grown up in a different world think there was something equally queer about the state of the sex instinct among us?" (<http://www.covenanteyes.com/2010/01/12/cs-lewis-on-lust-part-3/>).

Our appetites for sex, for approval, for accomplishment, for money, and for experiences betrays our blindness to true value, and to that which is lasting. We are a people who preoccupy ourselves with trivial matters until our life has passed us by, and all we've done is lost with us – the parts that hadn't already dissipated long before, anyway.

The only thing that provides ultimate value is that which is lasting. We are to lay up treasures in heaven where moth and rust don't corrupt. What is it to hope for the repetition of another day? Hope is a looking forward to something better and lasting. This is why this life will never hold ultimate hope, and why a hope in the eternal is so vital. True hope is impossible when fire and certain destruction is inevitable, but is inevitable when life is made possible.

# Eight

All life is marked by the passage of time  
The body developing in its growth  
Mind's acumen accruing in the wise  
Soul's innocence gone for what cynic knows

Life is lived longing to time's curse eschew  
Grown body longing to be in its youth  
Cynic wishing for innocence imbued  
**Eight** days of age with naught but love accrued

But life made new only to age again  
Would merely extend the time which we fall  
Ultimacy still death and striving's end  
Or vanity, tract'less and cyclical

The promise of a new life's only good  
If life brought forth truly escapes the old

None who live can escape time's impact. The body ages, wisdom is gained through experience, and cynicism is gained through the loss of innocence.

The goal for many, however, seems to be avoiding the curse of time's passage. We don't want our body to age, and many of us wish we could get back to a more innocent state when we didn't know how evil the world truly was.

The reference to eight days is due to the notion of eight being a new beginning (the first day of a new week – after seven days). It's also the day on which a male child was circumcised in Israel. Circumcision in the Bible represents a newness of life and a mark of promise. At this point in a child's life, age of the body, wisdom through pain and experiences, and cynicism have not yet taken their toll. All the child knows is the love and provision of his or her parents.

What's the point of having a new life or being born again if you're just rewinding things to repeat the aging and decaying process again? While you may end up with more time alive or more time to enjoy, you also end up with more time bemoaning the evils of the world and the decay that occurs within you.

Even if one extended their time by being born anew, the ultimate reality ends up being death and a longer time of toil before you get there, and/or if one believes in infinite reincarnation, then a vain cycle of repetition. Here, tractless is meant to convey two notions. First, it's meant to imply tractionless. An infinite rebirth would just be repetition to no end. I understand that most/all reincarnation systems end with a sort of perfection, higher state, or Nirvana, but here I am just showing that a perpetual reincarnation would be hopeless. Just like the repetition from the last poem, there's nothing that makes me think anyone's human nature would be different the second time they were reincarnated – especially if they don't take all the lessons they've learned with them from previous lives. And if one is different without bringing along their experiences, then in what way can we consider them a reincarnated individual? Haven't they become a different person – one who is only doing differently because they and their nature are different? Where is the continuity? The second way the word should be taken is in its literal sense. Tractless simply means an area of wilderness that is unclaimed or extremely wild. To live in a world where my actions had very minimal ramifications, and I could just be reborn upon each death, seems to be a wild notion that could lead to some horrendous implications for morality and the way people live. It is a bit reminiscent of the movie "Groundhog Day" or "Live. Die. Repeat." (a.k.a. "Edge of Tomorrow"), where the characters can just keep dying without any real ramifications. The implications of this for evil and justice, reward and punishment, are dismaying.

In both of the aforementioned movies, freedom comes when a higher goal is achieved, and the audience feels relief and joy. While I know that the concept of escaping the cycle is not just a Christian notion, I think it is the most fulfilling one. Not only does it provide a reasonable, ultimate end, it also acknowledges the reality of evil and suffering here. The concept of betterment and eternal goodness is a widely held idea, and I think something many long for and recognize as a necessity for any great hope.

## \* Nine

All long to build their home on mountain top  
All long to leave the earth beneath their feet  
But all this mystic dreaming is false hope  
For who could dwell where glimpses are but fleet?

And who could live reminded of one's breath?  
Or who could live where snow encompasses?  
Who could live amongst vicious elements?  
And who could live where friend rarely passes?

**Nine** clouds below do not a hope instill  
A tenth will always float above your head  
And low or high, our weak wills always will  
Lead us to live a life unto our death

The mountains rise uninterred from the earth  
Nature's Babel cannot defy our birth

Everyone not only wants mountain top experiences, they want to stay on top of the mountain. While the experience upon reaching the top of the mountain is great, most forget that this experience will soon be obscured by fickle weather and haze in a short while. Mountain summits are great achievements, but terrible places to live, as they are places to be conquered, not places to call home.

Besides the changing view, there are many reasons a mountain top is a terrible place to live. The air is thin, causing one to always be short of breath – even causing hypoxia leading to death. The elevation and geological formation make its weather ever changing and fierce. The elevation makes its climate extremely cold, and the mountain itself provides many perils. And finally, very few people reach the mountain top, and calling it home would mean distancing self from others.

But even if we take the experience as good in and of itself, and refuse to call the mountain top home, it is still an experience that falls short. While the experience is great and reminds us of our ultimate desire, it is not itself our ultimate desire. We may climb up above the clouds, even nine levels of clouds high, but there will always be a tenth cloud above us. I use the notion of nine clouds to evoke the implied “cloud 9,” a saying that is used to mean the best possible experience or mood one could have. This added “tenth” cloud alludes to two notions. First, NOAA classifies clouds into ten major types, though there are thirty plus subtypes. So we will never get above the tenth level of clouds. Second, it alludes to the notion in Buddhism of ten levels. The ninth level is Bodhisattvahood, while the tenth is Buddhahood. The aspiration is to reach the 10<sup>th</sup> for perfection. While I don’t ascribe to that, it’s a good use for the numerology and imagery. In the end, our mountain here represents accomplishment and success – but it falls far short of that. The perfect mountain top would extend us all the way to the heavens, but any mountain top we experience falls far short of that. Our attempt to sustain our mountain tops in this life place an emphasis on the wrong thing – the mountain – rather than on the goal towards which we should ascribe – the heavens.

Here I make very clear that the notion of reaching the tenth level is absurd. A man’s will is depraved, and will always prevent one from perfection, regardless of how high one climbs.

The mountain rises far above the earth, and allows much clearer views of the heavens through the thinner atmosphere and it is closer to the heavens. But while it rises high above the earth, it is still bound to it and connected – and still relatively far from the heavens. While mountain top experiences are great, they will always be a far cry from what the world should be, and they will always be unsustainable in the long term of humanity’s course of history.

Nature’s Babel, or a mountain that attempts to extend man to heaven, still falls very short. It cannot defy our nature and elevate us to God, or bring about a world that is truly fixed – selves included. They are means to make the world a better place and mend creation, and they are reminders of our longing for the way the world should be. However, they are terrible substitutes for the heavens.

# Ten

They say when I point something strange occurs  
More fingers end up pointing back at me  
But one who points this out is just absurd  
Prescriptive end from a descriptive means

Judgment's now passed upon judgment itself  
All but affirmation is disallowed  
New judges justify this evil swell  
And punish those whom to their gods won't bow

This hypocrisy, though wrong, is half right  
**Ten** fingers put to use make helping hands  
But who will help cure us from evil's blight  
When evil not affirmed seeks recompense

The world's in need of helping hands and feet  
Solution only one the truth can treat

I hate it when people say that pointing always leads you to have more fingers pointing back at you. I understand the point...but judgment is not a bad thing in and of itself. Our culture is pushing back way too hard against our ability to judge right and wrong – ironically and hypocritically, judging those who judge. And to use such an argument as this is to prescribe an action (you shouldn't point out others) from a description (more fingers are pointing at you). While few people really use this argument, it's very similar to the types of arguments people actually use against judging. You shouldn't tell me I'm wrong (prescription) because you don't know how I feel (description). We see that the description has nothing to do with the prescription. The way I do or do not feel has nothing to do with your actions. Your actions are measured against objective morality, not the way either of us feels. Just think about how such an argument could be applied to some terrible situations (How did slave owners feel? How do dictators who commit genocide feel? – I would imagine they were getting what they wanted, so it was great for them). What our culture has done is equated morality to feelings, and conflated two very different things. Society's current argument for moral systems is often just as absurd as saying that the direction of my fingers shows who is in the wrong, and scarily, it's just as easy to amend. All I have to do to fix my fingers is point them all at another – then according to the argument, my judgment is fair. Likewise, in a society of morals based upon feelings, all I have to do is get the majority to feel the way I do. That's why in many ways, our cultures are just as barbaric when it comes to moral judgment as we say previous cultures were. We just disparage, berate, and publically shame those who don't agree – until those who disagree become dissidents, state shaming becomes state imprisonment, and in extreme cases, genocide or state mandated executions of political enemies.

This largely summarizes the beginnings of most the atrocities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I'm not saying it always happens, but fickle moral systems are just as, if not more prone to anarchy, revolution, and violence than systems that are grounded in and stick to more absolute standards that don't change (e.g. love, nonviolence, freedom of ideas, etc.). Absolute morality can certainly be barbaric and atrocious, but the best, most grounded system would be a good, objective system of morality. While people or societies may go against those objective morals at times, violence and barbarism could always be called wrong in such systems. As it stands in the consistent logical outworkings of many today, the only reason slave owners, violent dictators, and rapists are wrong today is because we currently think it is as a majority. But in the past or the future, such moral judgments may change.

Ironically, while it's wrong to judge others and the way they feel, it's ok to judge those who are making moral judgments, disregarding their feelings along the way. Apparently some feelings are invalid, and the judgy judges get to decide that based on their feelings.

If another's feelings aren't affirmed in a fickle society, there is backlash. Here I am writing in light of this recent lawsuit of a family in Ohio who are being fined \$135,000 because someone had the symptom of surprise and shock that they weren't agreed with. God forbid someone not affirm an action in which you participate. Now we must bow to the pleasures and whims of others, according solely to their subjective feelings rather than to an objective standard of morality. I am not saying that I necessarily agree with the individuals being fined, but to fine someone for judging an action/event – not an individual – seems to be obviously wrong.

But for as asinine as judgmental hypocrites are (and we all fit that category at some point or another), they do hit on something important. I believe their backlash is against a very judgmental church and religious Victorianism that has pervaded Christianity for a while now. The church has been using its fingers to point in condemnation, leaving their hands unavailable to be used for helping. While I strongly disagree with the major ideals and conclusions of the new liberal judgmentalists, I have to acknowledge the great disservice and injustice and indifference that has been enacted by the church in the recent past. If we would put down our fingers of condemnation and our clenched fists of vindictive anger, maybe we'd be able to come alongside people and love and serve them as they ought to be loved and served - as Jesus loved and served [see blog on "When Helping Hurts" <http://dckreider.weebly.com/blog-theological-musings/when-helping-hurts> ].

But at the same time, while we want to help others where they are, we do realize that the sin in which they are living is a blight. I originally had plight, as sin definitely is a plight, but I feel as though blight more conveys the sickness and need for a cure. So unfortunately, while we help those entrapped by evil, their notion of help includes affirmation. Help without affirmation is nothing to them. Unfortunately, affirmation just feeds the disease of evil,

but not affirming it causes evil to seek payment or revenge. How are we to help those suffering from evil when they require us to feed the very thing from which we know they need freed? And how are we to do this knowing that we ourselves need freed from the exact same thing?

So what are we to do? We are to move out and help. But at the same time, we have to speak truth. While our society may relish in evil and require a double payment from us – our physical service and social payment for not affirming – we must be willing to pay the cost. But by no means should this cost include the suppression of truth. But this truth is not only meant for those whom we must move out to help, it is meant for us as well. For the truth shows us that we, the helpers, are sinners as much as anyone else, and it helps us to reach out in humility and love – the only way truth can effectively and winsomely be shared.



## \*Eleven

The hands of time and hands of fate are bound  
Entangled in a grip loosened by naught  
Each new life and new hope are soon unwound  
By child – Entropy - this marriage has wrought

Many then lead parsimonious lives  
Fear to spend what's for them spent anyway  
While rest don't rest until endeavors thrive  
Just for life and labors to run away

So hoard not that which is not yours to keep  
And waste not that which is yours to steward  
**Eleven** 'ours you have to sow and reap  
'Til midnight strikes imparting just reward

Time and fate are aligned for our demise  
So keep time and eyes fixed upon the skies

I link time and fate here because time and our demise seem inextricably linked. As time passes, our demise nears. Here I use “fate” in the negative sense, which is how it is largely used today. I recognize that it has had a more neutral meaning in the past. There is absolutely nothing that we can do to prevent the passage of time or the body’s demise.

Time and fate are wound at the start of each new life. As a one enters the world, and as one realizes their hopes and aspirations, time and fate are wound to their fullest extent, and start unwinding until they are realized. The imagery here is of a pocket watch that one winds up. However, entropy is the result of time and fallenness (fate), and the pinnacle of organization and creation – a new life – begins to unwind towards disorder and destruction.

In an attempt to avert the problem of time and fate, people tend to have two responses. The first is to be stingy with their time. They are afraid to spend their time, and hoard it in frustrated relaxation, afraid they’ll end up spending all their time up. Ironically, time passes regardless of one’s choice to spend it. So time is spent whether one attempts to save it or not.

The rest of the people attempt to fill every moment of time they have so that none goes to waste. They are constantly building their legacy: business, money, memories, experiences, etc. And all of this refusal to rest leaves them incapable to catch up with the time that escapes them, the fate that hunts them down, and the vanishing nature of man’s labors that are erased with their memories (see poem “History’s Humor”).

In the end, both of these positions are faulty. We don’t keep time (play on words), though we keep it – and we should not waste that with which we’ve been blessed, but rather steward it well. It’s a loan.

The eleventh hour is a phrase that means “at the last possible moment.” So we have a full twelve hours until we come to the end. As the book of James says, our life is but a vapor, so our end is always very near. We are all living in the eleventh hour. Here, the end is an allusion to the fulfillment of our fate, or death. We have a set time in which we labor, and then we die to receive our just rewards. While the original phrase is most likely not speaking of the 11<sup>th</sup> hour as leading up to midnight, I am using it in both a literal and figurative sense. The other reason I use midnight is because it is another allusion to the Bible’s story of the bridegroom coming at midnight, and the need for the wedding party to be prepared. Likewise, those on earth who know that justice and redemption are coming should be prepared for such things.

I say that time and fate align here as an allusion to the notion of the stars aligning. This phrase is usually meant as things are in our favor, but here time and fate will certainly align, and they align against us. But while those things are certain, we must also be diligent to keep time, and to keep our eyes trained upon the sky. We are not keeping time because we control it, and we are not training our eyes on the sky for the stars to align. Rather, we’re stewarding the time we have and keeping it well, as we look up to the heavens for our redemption to come, and justice to be dealt. It is not a dependence on time and fate, but rather a dependence on the only promise we have of overcoming those things.

# Twelve

We all follow in the footsteps of some  
By choice, some by human nature ingrown  
Desire of all, a domain to be won  
Life to live to seed and to harvest grow

Then the seeds harvested from long before  
You sow new seeds promising to bring hope  
Not for what the future may some day store  
Rather all the excess you can devote

Yourself then to living a learned life  
Built upon work of those whom time has passed  
Examples of what we should all be like  
**Twelve** disciples who shared our savior's path

To a life of plenty - experience  
Antidote to destruction's deviance

We all follow in the footsteps of some  
**SOME** By choice, some by human nature ingrown  
**INGROWN** Desire of all, a domain to be won  
**ONE** Life to live to seed and to harvest grow

**GROW** Then the seeds harvested from long before  
**BEFORE** You sow new seeds promising to bring hope  
**HOPE** Not for what the future may some day store  
**STORE** rather all the excess you can devote

**Devote** yourself then to living a learned life  
**Life** built upon work of those whom time has passed  
**Passed** examples of what we should all be like  
**Like** twelve disciples who shared our savior's path

**Path** to a life of plenty - experience  
**Experience** antidote to destruction's deviance

This poem is all about learning from the past and discipleship. Therefore, the end of each line is also needed to build full meaning and understanding of the proceeding line. I have always underestimated the importance of tradition in the church, and have only begun to realize its importance. This is a nod to the beginning of my understanding.

There are two major categories into which I lump human action: nature and experience. We either follow human nature or human example. Following human example can either be done positively (follow good actions taken by others), or negatively (avoid bad actions taken by others).

The innate nature of mankind is to conquer. We want to be rulers of some domain. While that domain certainly includes ourselves, we often extend that to others and to nature as well. Especially in today's YOLO mindset, we've got one life – and a short one at that – to set up our kingdom. Most of us, then, use our nature or the experience of those who have come before us to attempt the goal of establishing our autonomy and our kingdom.

Here is where I begin to set up the way I think things should be. Rather than giving into our nature, which is often steeped in lusts, we should rather look at prior examples. Use the seeds that come from a proven lineage, and be wary of new seeds from crosses.

Likewise, do not be greedy about your future kingdom and accomplishments. Harvest and store as the past has shown this to be wise, for we do not know what tomorrow brings.

I think one reason I like history is because of the lessons it teaches us which we don't have to learn for ourselves. Reading and learning is not a waste of time. Mankind has a heritage of which he should be aware. This is not more true than in the area of the Christian religion, where truths were passed down directly from the ultimate example.

# Thirteen

On Mockingbird lane deep in the dark woods  
Live victims of hatred, instillers of fear  
They unburden themselves of society's goods  
And long for a day when the good perseveres

Those tainted by hate oft fail to exempt  
Themselves from the same curse that curses their foes  
For living in darkness causes one to accept  
That light always loses to darkness imposed

Those who once scouted the fringes of life  
Now seek to attack us and drive us out  
Once victims are now vile bringers of strife  
Once prey now the hunters prowling about

**Thirteen** Thirteen the lane where monsters live  
The path to them, birth and experience

All I could think about with the number “13” was horror sorts of things. But at the same time, I was nearing the end of the poem series without really throwing any specific nods to Atticus. At the same time, I didn’t want to throw in anything from “To Kill a Mockingbird,” as that would have been too obvious. The only other mockingbird association I had was from the Munsters, an old TV show. That being said, the concept of this poem does fit in with the character Atticus from “To Kill a Mockingbird.” In the book, Atticus faced the darkness head on rather than receding from it, reeling from it, or embracing it.

I imagined a family living in seclusion, away from the world. To be a family withdrawn like that, I imagined that some sort of terror must have befallen them. They probably withdrew because of the world’s oppression and discrimination towards them, an individual or group’s ill action towards them, or something of that sort.

But withdrawing from problems and people tends to have an extremely negative effect. Secluding oneself in darkness, from darkness, ends up choking out light, and making the two types of darkneses (moral and societal) indistinguishable. I think the recent tragedies in the U.S. show us exactly how hate can be bred in darkness, and how the victims of that hate can triumphantly fight back against that darkness by looking it straight in the eyes and maintaining a dwelling in the light rather than withdrawing into darkness themselves.

I think particularly of the boys from Columbine who were picked on, felt ostracized from the community, and ended up living in more darkness than those who drove them there. Here is where I reference “Scout” and “Atticus.”

Here is the reference to the Munsters. And the creation of a monster is both due to birth (our human nature), and our experience. This notion echoes William Blake’s idea of innocence and experience. In this poem, I acknowledge that innocence is certainly tainted by experience, but I will go beyond Blake’s seemingly behavioristic notions of sorts in my last poem, as I will harp on the nature with which we are all born. We are far from blank slates. Humanity is born in sin and darkness, and only light can push it back. Atrocities and horrors are not perpetrated by the fostering of unique evil in the hearts of deviants, but rather possible from any one of us – all of whom have the viable seeds of evil sprouted in our hearts and waiting for nutrients. As one of Catalina’s professors used to say, all of the evil we see [the Holocaust, Rape of Nanking, Khmer Rouge, Sudan’s genocide, the Croatian Genocide, Stalin’s regime, Mao’s regime, Civil Right’s era lynchings and murders, WW1, WWII, ISIS, Armenian Genocide, Ukrainian Genocide, Rwandan Genocide, massacre of the Kurds, Serial Killers like Pedro Lopez, Abul Djabar, etc.] – “this isn’t inhuman, it’s what humans do.” Only those ignorant of the history of the world, and particularly the 21<sup>st</sup> century (when all of the above horrors occurred), can deny that evil is ubiquitous not only in scale, but in scope. Horrific evil exists everywhere, and evil touches everyone.

This part plays off the last poem on discipleship as well. We need to learn from others rather than allow our human nature to reign and bring us to acts that may seem harmless (like seclusion in this poem), but lead to the destruction of self, others, and community. Humans were created to dwell in relationship with God, others, nature, and self. To pull away from that is dehumanizing.

## \*Fourteen

The party lines were drawn before our birth  
A line we dared to cross unto demise  
A choice made aligned with dark – light averse  
A soul malign'd for evil's enterprise

Choice's power lines the paths we have made  
As we detour rather than walk the line  
We line pockets with things that time has paid  
Line souls with tar from that for which we pine

Now out of line and running out of days  
A life line has been tossed for salvation  
The bottom line a death for life of grace  
A thick red line of Christ's imputation

End of the line draws close terribly soon  
**Fourteen** lines all our sonnet has to move



The theme of this sonnet is “14 lines,” so I used 14 phrases/words that used the phonetic “line.”

Good and evil have been established from ages past. In fact, it is so ingrained in our nature many Christians acknowledge it as “original sin.” While some think this an unfair sort of notion, we all choose to cross the line of our own accord. So while the lines were drawn before us, we reiterate it by our own choices.

Our souls, then, are marred and bent towards evil. I think I hit on this idea pretty frequently throughout my poems, though it is not in a hopeless sort of way. Yes, our natures are steeped in evil. I do not think we are all generally good. I think most generally act good, but largely for reasons of self-interest. Given certain experiences and opportunities, we could all very easily express obvious and deep evil. There is nothing in our natures to keep us from evil. Rather, our nature easily accepts and justifies it when given the opportunity.

Our choices continue to power our lives as we move forward full steam ahead, relishing in all the lust and evil we desire, pursue, and accrue along the way. But these choices we make towards evil are really just marring us more. It’s like a smoker’s lungs as the smoker continues to indulge their habit.

Despite our state, Christ has interceded on our behalf, and has interposed his blood. Here I use “thick red line” instead of thin. The phrase “thin red line” connotes the idea of a point of no return. So when Christ covers our sins, there is no turning back. We need not fear any longer, as his imputation is a joyous point of no return for our sins. But rather than use “thin” line, I use “thick” to also convey the sufficiency of the cost.

The death of our tarnished souls comes very quickly. We have only a limited time in which to use the power of choice for good. Just as all I would love to express hasn’t even been touched in these fifteen sonnets, and just as each sonnet has insufficient space to convey the notion which it is intended to convey, so it is with our lives and our expressions. We have a short amount of time alive, and need to use all the lines we get to align our selves and our souls with truth and goodness. I’ve expressed what the truth is about the world in this set of poems, and in Elin’s ABC’s I expressed the morals or goodness I most desire to express and to have my children pursue.

Baby K's Colors

# Blood Red

Glorious symphony of nature sings  
Inviting all within to take delight  
So cherish all provisions nature brings  
'Til spirits lead you to the land of light

But land of light's only light in degrees  
No shining source that differs from our world  
If nature has composed this symphony  
I fear the crescendo of pow'r unfurled

The blood red sun of morning may entice  
The dawn of day shines hope on what's to come  
Sailors who've seen sea's beauty and trade's spice  
Know straight lines are to fear - a rule of rhumb

Man and nature live lives that are depraved  
My fear, then, to eternity enslaved

The title here conveys a number of notions. First, it alludes to the main picture of the sonnet, which is the blood red sun and sky at dawn. It also summarizes one of my major complaints with this system, which is that the continuation of a violent and depraved world isn't a system of hope and goodness. Finally, it alludes to the people group represented in the "Jesus Loves the Little Children" song.

I am not particularly familiar with Native American religions – and probably more than most other sorts of worldviews, they are the most diverse due to the number of tribes and the size of the region they encompass (N. and S. America). In general, I summarized the belief system as one that emphasizes the unity with nature, and the passage of our spirits into another world after our deaths. My novice impression is that this tended to be very nature centered, and that our spirit life tended to be a continuation of this life in some sense. We either walk this earth or a spirit world that is very much like this one – where we will be doing the same things (hunting, fishing, walking through forests, etc.).

It doesn't matter if this portrays one Native American philosophy or all of them – it is an idea that can be addressed, and it can help to highlight some of the strengths of the Christian worldview. If there is an afterlife that is essentially the same as ours, but just a continuation, then what is there to look forward to? Someone who had a relatively good life may love the concept, but this is no consolation for those with terrible lives. Being distasteful doesn't mean the view is wrong, but it should make us take a good look at its validity.

And if nature is idolized, and nature has formed this spirit world – or if nature is the focus of the spirit world – this really provides no consolation. For in this world, nature is cruel. Death and suffering often prevail. If the spirit world is a more intense version of this world, I would hate to think of what would become of pain and suffering. This is why I say the light is only light in degrees. There may be a new sun - a brighter one - but this is only a quantitative difference, not a qualitative one. The sun has more magnitude, but it is still of the same substance. There is no newness - no change of nature in this extended reality, for no problem was solved, no ultimate evil conquered, and no redemption.

As nature is worshipped for its seeming beauty and harmony, only those with experience of the great evil can truly interpret it. One can see the red sky in morning as it shines on the world and wonder at its beauty and majesty. But the sailor who has experienced the impending storm and tumult that will follow such a sky sees much more than beauty. In fact, such beauty may be obscured to the sailor by the knowledge of what evil lies behind. It is a fairly straightforward conclusion to look at the sun and its beauty and think no further. Likewise, it is a fairly straightforward conclusion to look at nature and the intuition of continued existence and think no further. But sailors know that straight lines can be far more perilous than seemingly curved ones. Attempting to travel the seas in a straight line means the constant adjusting of course as sailors attempt to follow the ever changing "great circle" trajectory. While this may not be a huge deal now with GPS, in the past, it could easily lead to being pushed off course through carelessness or in a storm. However, following a rhumb line – a seemingly hectic course on paper – actually allows the sailor to ensure they reach their destination with accuracy as they follow a constant bearing. In this line I also intend to convey two other concepts. 1) "rule of rhumb" is meant to convey the idea "rule of thumb," to show that straight lines, as a rule of thumb, aren't the best to follow when it comes to worldviews. There is often much more nuance and digging that needs to be done. Straight lines may often be the shortest distance between two points (though not in marine navigation), but they rarely work. 2) A "rhumb line" was also a nickname for taverns in seaports, and it likely reminds readers of "rum," which is thought of as a sailor's drink. If you drink a lot of rum, you will likely not be walking in a straight line.

While this poem doesn't directly address the validity of this generalized Native American philosophy or religion, it does address what comfort can and cannot come from holding to such a view. If we see the depravity of both nature and humanity in this world, it should be a very fearful thing to consider that both may continue on into eternity. Annihilation would be a much greater comfort to many who have experienced the tooth and claw of nature. Unlike Christianity, which acknowledges the problem of sin and provides a resolution for restored relationships in the resurrected life, the Native American philosophy generalized here perpetuates a miserable, meaningless existence. This doesn't disprove the truth of such a worldview, but it should unseat any hope one attempts to find in it.

# \*Yellow Brick Road

All is one and the one is in us all  
Eternal being seeking its release  
Together we stand, divided we fall  
So fight illusion of reality

If all's illusion, where can trust be placed  
Senses and sensibilities the same  
Both liars, with desires, killed in haste  
Called to trust what all shows to be inane

Why fight your intuitions and desires?  
Because they lead some to destructive ends?  
How is it that your temples then house fires?  
Force that kills some same force that warms our friends

All yellow brick roads lead to the same place  
Land of Oz where curtains are commonplace

The title alludes to the main picture of Oz. It seems like a magnificent, magical, mystical place – with a road of gold leading there. But as you travel deeper and deeper into the land, you eventually come to find that it is all legerdemain. It is all façade. The seemingly mystical substance poofs away with the click of your heels. It seems surreal because it isn't real. This poem, then, focuses on the Eastern belief system. That obviously encompasses a broad range of thought – from Confucianism to Hinduism, as well as a plethora of other ideas. The main idea I focused on here is the uniquely Eastern notion of mysticism that sees reality as illusion and throws off notions of rationality and logic. I am not at all an expert on Eastern religions, so this is intended to be my response to it as I have perceived it from those I know of who ascribe to this sort of ideology.

Eastern thought seems to have a tendency towards pantheism – or all as god. Everything is part of nature, and god is in everything. We are all part of this one substance of deity. Our problem is that we are trapped in this material world and we are bogged down by everything here. We need to free ourselves of these distractions and illusion so we can realize our oneness and divinity. Our way to freedom is to denounce this illusion and free ourselves from it, often through asceticism and ritual.

But there is one obvious place where Eastern thought breaks down. I am told that my intuition, empiricism (use of my senses), logic/rationality, and my nature (desires) are all wrong – or at least severely unknowable and misguided. I sense the world around me, my intuition tells me it's real, rationality tells me this world is more likely to be real than illusion, morals seem to be objective, and my desires correspond to this world in which I live. However, Eastern thought would have me throw off all these ways of gathering data and gaining knowledge, to adhere to their ideology. But if I have thrown out all ways of gathering data and assessing the validity of an idea, on what grounds should I trust their philosophy? How can they make a truth claim that essentially annihilates any ability to assess truth, and expect me to believe it? I certainly empathize with the idea that the aforementioned ways of gathering data and coming to knowledge are flawed, and rarely/never lead to 100% certainty (which I'll get to in my "Blues Brothers" poem. But they at least provide us with a starting point and a standard for faith. Everything about this Eastern notion screams "inane!" The philosophy may be right, but there is absolutely no way to know that it is, and no reason for me to trust it.

The often ascetic nature of this worldview makes me wonder about the allure of it. It seems as though it's draw stems more from a negative philosophy than a positive one. In fact, I don't see how it can really have much of a positive philosophy if it essentially abolishes truth. So did the first Eastern philosophers notice that desires lead to weakness in anger? Did they see how lust lead to heartache and brokenness? Did they see how desire lead to cruelty? Did they see that intuitions were sometimes faulty and lead to problems? Did they notice optical or other sensory illusions and recognize that empiricism couldn't lead to ultimate truth? Did they ponder moral dilemmas with seemingly no right answer? Did they recognize all of these things, then throw their hands up in the air and say that since nothing can be known with certainty – the one thing we can know is that this is all illusion? From my very brief, novice glance, that's what it feels like.

It is evident that desires often lead to pain. It is evident that intuitions and senses falter. But this more Eastern, negative philosophy comes up lacking in explanatory power, for it doesn't account for the positive. Here, I use the analogy of fire to make my point. We recognize that fire is a very terrible thing. It burns homes, makes orphans, kills families, displaces wildlife, annihilates resources, etc. Yet at the very heart of this philosophy – in temples and the like – we see fire in constant use. This destructive force is harnessed and used for the good, despite the knowledge of the bad contained within it. If those who adhere to Eastern thought could recognize the great symbol this fire truly is, perhaps they would realize that the potential for fault doesn't make something useless. It remains useful so long as we don't become careless.

The Eastern thought which makes truths and lies indistinguishable, makes all paths lead to the same place. All roads lead to heaven, or eventual perfection. But these roads don't truly lead there. Rather, they lead to Oz – a place that looks and sounds like where you want to go, but where truth is masked by curtains, where you can't know anything, and where that which is wrong with us and the world is never addressed or fixed. The lion remains fearful, the scarecrow doesn't get a heart, the tin man doesn't get a new body, and we never make it to our true home. We live in Kansas, but are allured into the illusion of Oz.

# Black Magic

Malevolent, capricious deities  
Ancestral spirits – cherished heritage  
Hear our sincere incantations and pleas  
Make our health and wealth your prerogative

One wonders why beings worthy of praise  
Would ever by one's pittance be allured  
One's kin, helpless, trapped, rotting in their graves  
Gods impotent, the future not assured

A true god has all power and needs none  
His creatures not just weaker creations  
Rather, subjects to him and world he loves  
Blessed by grace of their participation

The gods are not cause we manipulate  
Our God is grace, and seeks to liberate

My impression of African religions is that they tend towards manipulation of the spiritual. I think of Voudon (Voodoo) as a prime example of this. While its origin isn't Africa, it certainly implemented religious elements from African religions. The religions seem to focus on invoking spirits who are often underlings of a greater creator, and/or are impersonal forces – as well as connecting with ancestors. The main goal of these religions seems to be less about some eternal happiness and focuses more on manipulating the spiritual realm to immediately influence particular situations in life.

There are two main problems with focusing on underling spirits or a pantheon of gods, as well as dead relatives. As far as the relatives go, if they are dead, it leaves one wondering what good they are in the spiritual realm. Second, it leaves one wondering how any deities would benefit from what one does in the physical realm, and it leaves one wondering why individuals would worship deities that lack omnipotence and control of the future.

It doesn't make sense that if a god exists, he or she has any need of us. If all things have come into existence through that god, that god has all power over his creation and subjects. This god is not simply a weaker creation, and is in a vertical rather than horizontal relationship. When a true god exists, this god needs nothing from his creation, and therefore extends all good to his creatures through grace.

If we live in a world where we can manipulate the gods, it shows that the gods aren't really gods. There may be higher powers we need to coerce to make our lives enjoyable, or gods who we can manipulate because they need us, but this doesn't answer ultimate questions. It is only if our God is truly God that we can live a life of peace because he can act solely from a position of grace.



# \*White Coat

White padded rooms for those who've gone insane  
White houses when a room just will not do  
White coats for those who tend and heal the lame  
White flight for those to whom world owes its dues

A world disjointed, fractured, disabused –  
Of notion that the whole world's truly whole  
Sees value only in instruments used  
Songs souls sang succumbing to rational

But world is more than manipulative  
A place to form and fashion our own ends  
The world is created explicative  
God's expression we ought enjoy and tend

The best pragmatism can never work  
Unless one understands their purpose first

We humans categorize everything. We have our set places for people and things events, and everything else. Whereas some nations, tribes, or peoples worked in groups or had more dynamic systems, for the past several hundred years, Europeans, in particular, have specialized and separated everything. Everything has a function, and if it doesn't make our jobs faster and easier and better, then it is trivial. In the first quatrain I describe the place for the mentally insane – in white, padded rooms. I also poke fun at our politicians, which rings especially true this political season (2016). I wrote this in October, before the president was selected, so it's not a super specific jab. It's talking about politicians in general. It seems as though the difference between the mentally insane and the politicians in DC and candidates running for the white house is a matter of degrees in terms of their housing. Sometimes it seems as though the more insane are given plush jobs and seats of responsibility.

Doctors, of course, also have their place with their attire – their pure, white coats. Others find their niche as well. Here I speak of white flight, where entitled whites leave their community. They think that their money and ability to leave entitles them to forsake the needy around them, forsake other groups of people who are unlike them, and move away from problems. This view that the world owes them a comfortable life pushes them out to the suburbs.

Such a specialized system fractures the world. It dis-integrates it. It disabuses humanity of the notion that the world is one massive, beautiful collage of story and purpose, and the notion that we are all valuable humans regardless of place or position. We are all connected and responsible for our fellow humans. Whereas the Eastern notions of wholeness take everything too far and prevent important distinctions and discernment, this notion of pragmatism that is common in Western modernity goes too far the other way. It says that there is really no wholeness, there is only distinction.

Ultimately, this fracturing leads to compartmentalization and utilitarianism. If I live in a particular fragment, then what I do is only valuable in so much as it advances my small world and agenda. If I see no use for it in my sub-world, then it has no use. We see this very clearly as the fine arts have fallen out of favor. But while we may live compartmentalized lives, we were not made compartmentalized. We may have abolished song and color from our lives, whitewashing the walls of reality into a blank canvas upon which no color will ever touch, but our souls were made to sing. They sing not because song necessarily advances our own little slice of life, but because holistic life contains song. Our pleasure, enjoyment, and fulfillment rely on integration. I recommend reading G.K. Chesterton's Orthodoxy, as he spends a considerable amount of time elaborating on the problem of hyper-focus.

The world isn't intended to be a tool we use for our own contrived purposes. When we make it as such, meaning, altruism, and all sorts of fantastic things fly out the window. This is because we aren't creators of ultimate meaning. We are discerners of meaning. God has created us with souls that reflect his image, in a world that he made to glorify him. He has blessed us with work – with the opportunity to tend the garden he has created. We are called to enjoy him and love him by tending what he has made and serving others. But notice that the tending and keeping aren't the goal – rather the enjoyment of relationship is the goal. Tending and keeping is how we enjoy each other together by helping, creating, sharing, etc. One is able to tend and serve the world as a scientist, but not only as a scientist. The liberal arts colleges still house the long held Christian notion that the world is integrated because it was created by one creator, with order and purpose. Pragmatism is a great outlook, but it can only work if it knows the purpose for the work. If the goal is survival, then that which leads to survival is good. If the goal is pleasure, then that which leads to pleasure is good. The problem with modern pragmatism is that nobody knows what the work ought to be. This leads to enmity, as all of our differing goals and forms of pragmatism which guide us conflict with each other – causing us to prioritize self over others.

It is ironic that most forms of pragmatism can't work, as this is what pragmatism is. Pragmatism may be great at shining the tires on a car, but it leaves the rest of the car in disrepair. The only pragmatism that works is the pragmatism that seeks to cut through self-centeredness and self-created "purpose," and embrace that for which we were created.

# \*Green Space

All that I see is what I want to get  
Desire within appeased by what's without  
For without all I see there is regret  
A happiness only matter endows

But happiness, this immaterial  
Emotion - need - cannot by mass be quenched  
Burdensome weight bearing upon my soul  
Only fades when greed's gravity repents

The mass accrued by mass is just more mass  
The end of all, the same, an empty grave  
A vast colorless field without grass  
When all's made right as all's given away

Centers of galaxies are dead black holes  
Centers of greedy lives, evil dark souls

The color green here is going to be used to convey the notion of envy. While envy can be about many different things, it is often founded in materialism (as in the acquiring of things, not the philosophy of what exists or how things came to be). This poem, then, is about the epistemology of materialism – the notion that having things is going to bring me happiness. We hear this all the time. When people are asking if they should take a particular job, purchase a particular item, or date a certain individual – it all boils down to “whatever makes you feel good.” Determining the veracity of a claim or the wisdom of a decision by the way it makes you feel as a consumer is not a good epistemology.

Here I use “without” in short succession but mean two different things. The first means that on materialism, I view satisfaction as brought by things outside of myself – inanimate objects and persons (which persons, on materialism, are really just animate objects. There’s no soul or significant distinction.). The second usage is essentially saying “without having that which is without” (or outside of oneself). So the goal on materialism is to achieve a state of internal happiness, but that state is only brought about by objects that are outside of oneself. Without the addition objects there is only regret.

But happiness and emotions aren’t material things. How can they then be satiated by that which is material? I’m certainly not saying that matter is bad, but that it does not explain fulfillment in and of itself. Immaterial values play a huge part. I could hand an Xbox to a remote tribe in the Amazon and they’d have a far different reaction than if I handed it to a teenager in the U.S. Matter does not contain the substance of happiness which it imparts to us upon its obtaining. Happiness is immaterial and is only filled by immaterial things. The burden of insatiable desire and greed weigh upon my soul like a black hole. They make it heavy, prevent fulfillment from being released, and cause me to devour everything within my path in search of filling the hole. But the only way for happiness to then come is for the gravity of this black hole to repent (in its literal sense, to turn completely around 180 degrees). This alludes to the notion that altruism, or the giving away of oneself to benefit others is at least part of the answer to opposing the faulty view of materialism. This is why I didn’t use the word “relent,” though it would have fit the rhyme. The answer isn’t just greed taking a back seat, it’s also about us pushing back against it to live in a truly fulfilling manner. Rather than gravity relenting altogether – which would just make one weightless – the gravity needs to do a 180, or repent. True happiness begins by being pulled outward.

Logically, we know that if we are just blobs of mass, and we accrue objects for our fulfillment, we’re merely mass acquiring mass. It’s like watching a water droplet on your windshield run into another one and become a bigger droplet. There is no value or fulfillment or worth to such an accrual of mass. In a moment, those water droplets will be engulfed by another, losing their identity, and flowing away until they are recycled to be no more as they once were. Ironically, when our standard for success is the accrual of more matter, it ends up leaving us empty. We end in death, where our end is as meaningless as the life we lived.

In the end, the universe will right the wrongs of materialism. Humans are spending their brief lives accruing material, which in the end, the universe will destroy and disperse in supernovas and heat deaths. The world of tomorrow is not the acquisition of things and therefore the acquisition of happiness, but rather a barren wasteland devoid of color, life, and light. As the universe continues to expand faster and faster, matter becomes more and more dispersed. In the end, then, all the matter we accrued for our pleasure is given away by the universe. It’s a fitting end for materialism, and a fitting end for matter. Here I use “field of grass” in two ironic ways. First, the vast field (or expanse) of space is very different than the colorful field we think of. Second, it is an allusion to the phrase “grass is greener on the other side of the fence.” The grass certainly is not greener here.

Here I summarize the poem. Galaxies are held together momentarily by black holes, but will eventually die and be dispersed into virtual nothingness. Likewise, materialists have greedy, devouring souls at their core, and try to hold their world together through stability and acquisition. But the end of them is the same. They will be destroyed and the matter they’ve accrued dispersed, and the matter that they are dispersed as well.

# \*Gray Matters

The mind, a ploy invented by one's brain  
A ghost - more like a wrench - in the machine  
Fiction that only serves, to us, restrain  
Where matters by the brain would best be schemed

But brain evolved by chance cannot know truth  
Nature only selecting survival  
Only law, survival, guides claw and tooth  
Mechanistic subjects to none higher

So go on, live "your" life as "you" desire  
Dismissive hand not even yours to wave  
While clarity of thought with time expires  
Knowing and being known move towards the grave

Ghost of will haunts those trapped in space and time  
Intellectualism, ploy of minds

This poem is about intellectualism. There are undertones of empiricism implied here as well, but it's hard to fit in a whole philosophical argument, rebuttal, and conclusion about various sorts of things with any nuance. The title is meant to say 1) the poem is about the brain (figuratively, gray matter), 2) the poem is literally about matter that is gray, the brain, 3) the poem is about issues that are very gray ("matter" used as a noun), and 4) gray matters, as in "is important" ("matter" used as an adjective). I understand that 1-2 seem very similar, but in the one I'm pointing to the brain as we intuitively think of it (as a seat of the person "I"), and in the next sense as just a blob of colored matter that does what it is programmed to do. I'm speaking of the same object in two different ways. 3-4 are also very similar, as 4 compliments 3. I am saying that what I am speaking of – the soul – is a very gray issue. There aren't clear cut answers and evidences either way. But allowing room for the gray is very important. Even on intellectualism, we need humility to understand that we are very uncertain about a lot of things and need to be open. We see this all the time on both sides of any issue.

On intellectualism, the notion of a non-physical mind is absurd. The notion is pejoratively referred to a "ghost in the machine." The mind or soul is a ghost – a fictitious goblin fabricated by mystics, loonies, and the superstitious who are still bound to foolishness by their evolution, ancestry, and social constructs. But the soul or mind, this contrived non-explanation, is more than just a silly story to intellectualists. It is actually a wrench thrown into the machine that ends up hurting man's progress. Choices and truths are easy to decide on intellectualism, as it all boils down to utility and empirical evidence. Since the mind or soul is just an obsolete, fictitious creation of our brains, we need to use our brains to toss such a notion to the side and move on with unobstructed intellect.

But what the intellectual empiricists don't understand is that this truth they "know" is extremely uncertain. In a world where we all is mechanistic – we simply follow our program. And what is our program? To survive, of course. This means that the program humans run has no concern about whether something is true or not. Alvin Plantinga has a great argument formulated about this evolutionary selection. His point isn't to say that truth wouldn't exist on naturalism, only that we could never have any confidence in whether something was true or not. William Lane Craig sums it up here: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/plantingas-evolutionary-argument-against-naturalism>. Free will, love, morality, and a plethora of other items as we intuitively know them are some of the many "truths" naturalists know to be logical fabrications on their system. So for us to live in a world with all of these lovely, intuitive aspects, and for us to have the ability to confidently know truth and be able to discover truth, it seems that we have to posit that we live with faculties endowed with reason that supersedes mere evolutionary utilitarianism, and for these things to hold, we must live in a world designed for discovery. It is a world where causation mandates all but the will of the soul. We can know truth because it exists here in our consistent world, and because our souls were created with the ability to recognize it.

On most forms of intellectualism (particularly with a materialistic bent), survival is the only game in town. Nothing else matters. See poem "Last Generation Alive" where I expound on morality. Also check out my blog to see where I expound on issues of morality on naturalism.

It's hard to see on intellectualism how we can even be having a discussion. Not only are there huge issues with my confidence about truth claims and the potential for discovery, but I've got huge issues with understanding how I can even exist as myself. Aren't I just a conglomeration of living organisms? In what way, then, do I actually exist as myself if I am really just a community of other life. By person, don't we really mean a community of cells and bacteria living in harmony with each other? The logic that a single "I" exists on naturalism - if applied consistently - seems to indicate that my subdivision, city, state, country, or world is a single living entity or person. If an individualized entity can be ascribed to me – a community of organisms working together – then certainly we are not individuals, but rather a part of some larger individual organism. Consciousness and personhood are huge issues on naturalism. The soul or mind seems less like a non-explanation and more like the only rational explanation to fit our properly basic beliefs and intuitions about how the world is. It makes the world livable and prevents us from having to live inconsistently.

In the end, where does intellectualism lead us? Well, it deteriorates as we age. Even the fame we accrue from our intellectual advancements – our legacy – fades with time as well. Aristotle has lasted two millennia, but what will be remembered of him in ten thousand years? And even if he is remembered until the end of mankind, there will be a day when he will certainly be remembered no more. Like the great Ozymandius who faded into the sands of time, or when the universe dies in heat death, Aristotle will become no more. So what benefit is it to Aristotle that he is remembered today? What ultimate benefit is it to him if he is remembered until the end of the universe? The end for all is the same. We will all be remembered until the day we will never be remembered again. And there will certainly be a day when we are remembered no more. Our fates are all the same in such a world.

Here I flip the beginning. Rather than the mind being a fabrication of the brain, I say that intellectualism as a form of empiricism or as a worldview is a fabrication of a deceitful, sinful will that stems from a fallen mind and soul. Only a soul in rebellion would devise such a hopeless system that undermines its own philosophies and longings just to prop oneself up for a finite time on the throne to rule as a self-proclaimed god.

# Rose Colored Glasses

Woman - apex of chance's creation  
The height to which all matter doth aspire  
Being, worthy of all consecration  
As all's consumed in pleasure's holy fire

Kindred souls kindle fire not just within  
Releasing flame to spread where'er will blow  
Consuming all, even their next of kin  
To feed the fires stoked so long ago

Quench not the fire that burns within one's soul  
Nor starve it unto cold mis'erable death  
Rather release fire where it's controlled  
To hearths - torches, to feed, to ease duress

Humans were made to live fulfilled as one  
Hedonists seek pleasure but for the one

Humanity is currently viewed as the pinnacle of existence and specialness. We are it. And while we are certainly special, our desires and accomplishments can lead to complete horror. The answer to this is to avoid elevating humanity's desires and passions, and rather elevate the proper aims. I don't think passions are ever bad in and of themselves. Rather, it is the goal of those passions. Fulfilling hunger, sexual desire, and justice can be great when seeking to do so as we were made to do. But when our aim is ourselves and our elevation, the same desires push us to gluttony, objectification, revenge and cruelty, and all sorts of deviant behaviors. But this stems from our aims, not our desires. Desires are merely the motivation that pushes us forward to accomplish our aims.

By this point I'm sure it seems I'm picking on atheism/naturalism, as many of the poems assume that God does not exist. While I'm sure part of this is due to my particular fondness for thinking about atheism and discussing the topic, I think a lot of it has to do with most other worldviews not comporting with a coherent notion of God. What worldview would lead to one thinking that accumulating matter was the goal of life? Seemingly one where matter was at center stage, not a world with a supernatural deity. What worldview would lead one to thinking that humanity was the center of meaning and value? Seemingly one where mankind was the highest form of intelligence. Most thinking that deviates from classical Christian thought about the world seems to lead one towards a world without a deity. Most other religions have at least some aspect of Christianity within them, whereas atheism deviates the most.

This poem begins by arguing that the highest form is humanity. This is the highest form of matter, designed by chance. Obviously that doesn't fit, since chance cannot purpose or design things. This is one of the big ironies, contradictions, and inconsistencies on naturalism. Purposed language in a world that cannot purpose. I continue on with the irony and contradiction, saying that all matter aspires to become human kind. It is the apex of matter's goal. No form of matter can compete with the complexity and wonder of mankind. Man is the last form to develop evolutionarily in terms of complexity, and is therefore the greatest creature. Some may call that a non sequitur, but they are only able to do so because they have reason. No other form of matter could do such a thing, and arguing reasonably would only prove the point that man is the best. Here I use "woman" to represent humanity rather than "man" to be sensitive to those who may be offended that "man" represents all of humanity.

Since humanity is the highest form, all that exists is under humanity. Humanity determines value. It is generally determined that what is valuable in a temporal world is the fulfillment of desires and pleasure. Truth, then, is that which leads to the satiating of desire and the fulfillment of pleasure.

But seeking to fulfill one's pleasure is not the best metric for value and happiness. First, as stated above, desires are not prescriptive in and of themselves. Two people can feel the same desire, yet pursue its fulfillment in two very different ways. Desires don't tell us what to do or how to do it, they motivate us to act. The fire of desire that burns within a person is a dangerous thing. As humanity goes about seeking to fulfill their pleasure – a whimsical, often irrational, uncontrollable thing – they impact all with whom they come in contact. Humanity is like a fire that is blown about and spread by the air (where'er is meant to say "wherever" as well as to say "where air").

The fire is not containable when one continues to feed it as much as possible, or refuses to contain it. As it feeds on more and more pleasures, it grows and begins consuming other things with which it comes in contact – even persons that one says they love. "Their next of kin" here refers to a story I just read about sex slavery in Romania. The article discussed how most of the child sex slaves are not kidnapped, but rather prostituted out by their parents. I know that kind of thing happens everywhere. What parent would do such a thing? One for whom pleasure is the epistemological lens for success and fulfillment in life. Some parents are so consumed with their own gratification and/or wellbeing, their burning passions consume their families.

But the answer is not to quell pleasure. Desires and pleasures are wonderful things, and we were made to be fulfilled. But seeing pleasure for the sake of pleasure is not what is fulfilling.

Rather than feeding the fire at will, or failing to contain it, we need to allow desires and passions to burn, but to do so in a controlled manner. We need to allow them to burn on torches and in hearths where they can light the pathways of our fellow man and our families, and where they can be put to use to feed others. Our skills and passions are wonderful things that can fulfill us as we use them to give and love and serve. We guide our passions and desires – they should never guide us. Such a thing is impossible without a goal, purpose, or mandate. In a world without objective morality and objective good and objective beauty, pleasure for pleasure's sake is a legitimate metric.

Our moral and mandate is to live in community as lovers of all. Hedonists love, but they only love themselves. Christians can live as one, for the One, by the grace of the One, but hedonists live for number one.



# Purple Haze

Chained in this life to hopelessness and strife  
Only one way to experience peace -  
Contempt body as it erodes in time  
Appease mind to find your only release

But flesh ignored, does not, a person, free  
Illusion – deception – mind's sleight of hand  
It binds one to a false reality  
Time seems to cease as they carpe diem

The flesh is not a lie we should despise  
Nor mind a fabricator of all ills  
The former, helping hands, inquir'ing eyes  
Latter, our mover, creator of will

Mind chained to thought of escaping body  
Is stuck in fog of immobility

“Purple Haze” is a reference to a song by Jimi Hendrix. The song is lyrically trippy, as the singer is in a fog of mental confusion and experience.

This poem focuses on the belief that what is true is that which frees our minds. This resembles the ancient gnostic heresy that viewed the flesh as bad. Some people believe that the mind supersedes the body, and attempt to free themselves of their body which hinders them. Our bodies are so limited, and they age and fade with time, until we turn purple in our death and decay. On a side note, I understand that “contempt” is not technically a verb, but I like it used as a verb. I have no problem taking words and shaping them to my meaning if it paints the picture I like.

The individual who believes that the mind will free one apart from the body is mistaken. The body is certainly limited, but the mind is limited as well. While the body fades with time, so does the mind. On top of this, the body seems more knowable as true than the mind. Our bodies largely convey what is experienced. Unless one is paralyzed, our bodies send signals to our brains. It is in our brains where the interpretation of truth is skewed. What the body senses is generally true. It is in the mind that falsity commences. Psychosomatic disorders are formed in the mind and trick the body. Our minds can produce overconfidence. Our minds can fool us into believing what is untrue. So when one argues that we should seek truth and be free by pursuing the mind, I wonder how they know this is the best course, if it is their deceitful mind that tells them this. When one proclaims that living in the mind alone is the best course of action – essentially acknowledging that we throw off all we think we know of physical reality – I am very wary. Embrace what I know exists for whatever it is my mind conceives? Not only is this very subjective, but it lends itself towards tremendous error and bias.

Accepting such a course doesn't free, but rather binds one to oneself and a false construction of reality. It provides a false conception of self and the outside world. Ironically, this mentalist shuts out the outside world's reality and seeks to ignore the passage of time that exists and takes a toll on the body. Yet this is one of the groups who extols all to cease the day. On their system, there is no time, and therefore no day to cease. This is a play on words as well since I say time does “cease,” as in stop, which is later turned into the notion of “cease” as in to obtain.

Elevating the mind above and apart from the body makes humanity incomplete. The mind is the seat of our will and allows us to move out into the world, affect change, etc. But our immaterial mind's willpower is not enough to do these things. It needs the body to move and to do. The body without the mind is a useless, immobile shell. The mind without the body is a mobile, intangible, helpless wisp.

Here we end with our haze. For the mind without the body is lost in the haze or fog. There is no reality outside of what is immediately present – itself. It cannot see beyond. As such, it is aimless, helpless, lost, and immobile. It is useless and meaningless.

# Agent Orange

Judge not lest ye, yourselves, also be judged  
An eye for an I, a truth for a lie  
The speck you find in me will be enough  
To incur my wrath, condemning to die

Judgment withheld is not judgment unpassed  
For silence rings as loudly as freedom  
For both affect – one's course – another's path  
Freedom without recourse, march to death's drum

So shame not nor silence those who critique  
Though biased friend or pious enemy  
Judgment taken to heart has pow'r to speak  
To heal deaf ears, to make the blind to see

We can judge a tree by the fruit it bears  
And judge our lives by the fruit that we share

This is a reference to the herbicide used in the Vietnam war. Its job was to destroy the vegetation and crops of the enemy. It demolished their cover and their sustenance. In this poem, the allusion carries in that I discuss the fruit one shares with others. So the notion of “orange” as a fruit comes in. I also discuss the suppression of criticism – leveling all critiques and objections that comes one’s way. This is like the practice of obliterating all that is in front of you so you don’t have to face opposition.

The first two lines is saying that if you judge me, I am going to retaliate. If your judgment is pronounced on an aspect of my life, rather than considering a potentially defective part of me, I am going to take offense personally to my whole being. And when you truly confront me with an issue, I will respond with lies by covering up my flaw, or lying about you. The “Judge not lest ye also be judged” is also a saying that comes from the Bible, and is often taken out of context. The Bible tells us all the time that we should judge, though it often tells us to do so mercifully and with self-reflection first. Judgment with humility, mercy, and love is a must – and often times those don’t go together. The Bible is also very clear that for Christians, that judgment has two major qualifications. First, judgment by the sword is for the government. The government bears the responsibility to punish with violence, not the individual (Romans 13). Second, Christians should expect little in the way of true morality from those who don’t believe. How can we judge those outside the church? It is fellow Christians who we must judge (I Cor. 5), and it is our brother and sister whom we must save from hellfire (Jude 1:23).

When you approach me in judgment, I will respond with excessive force. The way for me to arrive at happiness and to account for truth is to uphold my image. What is true and good is that which upholds me.

But silencing the opposition is ultimately pointless. Suppressing one’s judgment against you may temporarily lead to ease, but if a judgment is legitimate, ignoring it will ultimately lead to one’s destruction. A car company with a defective part can ignore the defect so they can avoid a costly recall, but eventually, this defective part will injure or kill someone and they will incur an even greater cost. They will face the lawsuit, plus a recall, plus a hit to their reputation. Likewise, if someone points out a character flaw and judges another, ignoring this judgment or condemning the judger merely pushes off the inevitable. For those who believe this life is all there is, they may succeed in avoiding their flaws catching up with them. But for those who know and understand that there is a final judgment, they realize that final judgment cannot be avoided. All deeds will catch up with us eventually. Freedom has the power to move us along with our choices, and silenced judgment has the power to allow us to feel affirmed in our course unto destruction. If we use our freedom without re-course (changing our path), there will be recourse for our continued path of action.

Judgment is vital from both friends and enemies. Friends are biased in your favor, so if they judge, you should probably listen. It means there are likely some glaring issues. Enemies are certainly biased as well, but for an enemy to point out a flaw in you is a very generous thing. For when someone points out an error, it provides you with an opportunity to correct that error, to show humility, and to get better. An enemy could not do a nicer thing than judge you. Listening to both of these judgments allows us to have the most objective view of ourselves, as we see what others see – not what our minds and hearts want to see.

In the end, the image that we are putting out to others is important. This is why their judgment is important. It allows us to see past our self-deception and into the image we put out there. Maybe they misunderstand us and their judgment is less about our heart and more about our presentation. But either way, both are important. This notion that we shouldn’t judge others is ludicrous. Its assumption is that there is no standard whereby we can judge. Yet saying we shouldn’t judge is a judgement in and of itself. We can certainly argue about what the standard for judgment is, but we can’t argue about whether judging is good or not. It 100% is good. For if there is no standard to judge, then I am legitimate in judging, because you can’t tell me not to. And if there is a standard to which we should all adhere, then I am legitimate in judging. Rather than arguing about whether we should judge others, we should be discussing the legitimacy of a particular standard by which we can judge.

# \*Brown Noser

We moderns are a breed like none before  
We throw off every vestige of the past  
As ancients, ignorant, should be deplored  
Their ideas fleeting, never to last

But by your own standard, what of your ways  
Critiquing others because they're not you  
Judging those who no longer have a say  
Your scarecrow set out in the field to hew

Blind to your own redolent arrogance  
You forget the past through your crapulence  
Stuck up and in present's rear orifice  
Flattery found in future's flatulence

I see now why noses smell and are brown  
Their recusatory scent bias drowned

I ended up not going where I thought I would with this poem. I was originally going to focus on sycophants and those who need approval from others. But I sort of already covered that in the “Agent Orange” poem focusing on being judgmental. So here I hit on a very popular philosophy. I think it was a good change. I discuss the notion that the majority or the present rules. So what was wrong in the past may be right now, and what was right in the past may be wrong now. I set that notion up in the first quatrain where I talk about denouncing the past for what we think now.

But this ideology is just repulsive to me. It provides absolutely no standard whereby we can judge any actions – past or present – as truly right or wrong. For if actions like slavery were right in their cultures and times, who am I to judge that action and speak ill of the past? And why should such an action become wrong all of a sudden? I may say it’s not good to do that now, but I can’t judge previous cultures for any sort of atrocity. Any judgment that comes from this philosophy is really just judging another for not being alive simultaneously with you. It’s judging them for not being you. This ideology has two huge impacts, alluded to with the scarecrow analogy. First, they put a scarecrow in the field of the past. So if you hang on to any ideas deemed passé (e.g. gender norms, traditional marriage, two parent families, etc.), you can be berated as bigoted and ignorant. There need not be valid arguments in either direction, or open dialogue. Rather, the scarecrow of being labeled a “bigot” hangs in the field to scare anyone away from adhering to the past. G.K. Chesterton has a great section in his book “Orthodoxy” that speaks about tradition and the respect we should have for it. At one part he says, “...tradition is only democracy extended through time... Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of their birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of their death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our father.”

The second allusion the scarecrow brings up is the notion of a straw man. The straw man fallacy is when you prop up a very flimsy, non-representative argument from your opponent, and then attack and obliterate your target. Of course it’s easy to knock down a straw man as opposed to a legitimate opponent. The ideology represented in this poem essentially does that with the past. Rather than argue against ideas, it sets up ideas from the past as foolish and ignorant just because they temporally precede the present views. All of this without truly exploring the merits of the past, or the holes in modern ideas.

This ideology boils down to pure, smelly arrogance. It’s distinct and repulsive. In this arrogance that is all about self, the past is tossed to the side and forgotten in the celebration of self. I use the word “crapulence” here as well because it not only conveys a definition that fits, but the word helps to build the imagery of this quatrain. I use a lot of smell words here – particularly indicating bad smells (e.g. redolent, **crapulence**, rear orifice, and flatulence). Each line in the quatrain alludes to a strong smell.

These are the lines where the “brown noser” comes in. I say that the individual who holds the ideology represented in this poem is stuck up – enforcing the arrogance from the first line in the quatrain. But then I say that they have their nose not only up in the air, but stuck up the present’s rear orifice. The brown nose comes from being a butt-kisser of the present. It is a complete and utter worship of the here and now. As Chesterton says, throwing off tradition is to destroy democracy and subjugate the most obscure class. To do so is utter narcissism and blind ignorance, simply because we exist now and can make such decisions. Interestingly, the future will do the same thing to what is now the present, as the present quickly turns into the past. The present’s legacy is to be flatulated out by the future, just as those who hold to this ideology flatulate out the traditions of their ancestors. The future, when it becomes the present, will digest whatever it is they like from us, then fart the rest of us out, as our memory dissipates into the air.

There is a play on words here, as noses smell in two ways. Noses smell in that they detect and interpret smells, but in this poem, the noses of the individuals represented smell bad because they’ve been where the sun doesn’t shine. That is also why they are brown. This repugnant smell is so strong, it drowns out any clarity and objectivity one might claim to want. Whereas an objective individual living in the present would recuse themselves from issuing harsh judgment or from withholding appropriate judgment from the past simply for being in the past, these modern day brown nosers smell so bad, they can’t recognize the stench of bias that lingers. I also use a play on words and here to indicate why the stench of bias and the need to recuse self is drowned out. I say “bias drowned,” which could also be read “by ass drowned.” This is the most repulsive poem I’ve written in any of the compilations. Hopefully it’s not too offensive. However, I find this modern rationale so ludicrous, self-destructive, and offensive – I figured the language was fitting to describe such a thing.

# \*Blues Brothers

The trilemma of truth weighs on my mind  
Or on or in what it is that I am  
Descartes may have shown me that I am I  
Why this matters – explain it! No one can

Truth interrogated by harshest souls  
Like men, will slump, exhausted and lifeless  
Confession gained may paint a picture whole  
Or damn all color to the black abyss

Nihilism destroys all that does exist  
Giving life blues, breathing life into death  
The only known, our ultimate exit  
Only state, optimistic'ly depressed

True skeptic's skeptical even of self  
Knows one thing with certainty, forfeits wealth

This poem is centered around epistemological nihilism – or extreme skepticism. It runs in the same vein with solipsism. It is the notion that there really isn't anything we can know for sure.

The trilemma here references the triad of problems that knowledge ultimately faces (see "Munchhausen Trilemma"). At the foundation of all truth, our rationale is either circular, assumptive (reliant on baseline assumptions or intuitions that can't really be proven), or infinitely regressive explanations (I explain this truth with x, but then I have to explain x with y, and y with z, ad infinitum). In essence, there is nothing we can really know with 100% certainty which escapes some fallacious foundation of reasoning.

So as the skeptic sits and thinks about truth, they may wonder who it is they really are. That seems to be the ultimate question. We can question everything outside of ourselves, but can we question ourselves? Doesn't Descartes show us that we can at least know our existence?

But even if Descartes is right, who cares? Extreme skepticism leaves one with practically no assurance of anything. With that knowledge – that I can't know anything with certainty other than I can't know – I am left with life being pretty meaningless. There is nothing to find out there, as I can never assess the ultimate truth or validity of anything outside of me. I can't even assess the truth or validity about most of me. Perhaps I am just a brain in a jar (a Boltzmann brain of sorts), in some sense akin to the matrix.

When one runs truth through the ringer like a skeptic, this creates a problem. Truth interrogated will respond very much like a human who is interrogated harshly. It will eventually slump into a helpless heap and become useless.

But perhaps even worse than being completely useless to me anymore, truth suffers a worse fate on skepticism. Truth interrogated to the extreme may tell us exactly what we want to hear. But as such, it is most likely an incomplete picture. While we may have lucked out in extracting the accurate truth through our torturous skepticism, it is more likely that a tortured truth will give us faulty information – or at least incomplete information. Truth may tell us that we exist, as Descartes says. And though it may be true, this affirmed truth alone – devoid of all other truths and certainties – will leave us devoid of light. We will have sunk into the abyss of ourselves, where no meaning can be found. How can something have meaning if that something is only about itself? Meaning can only exist in relationship (which I explain elsewhere in my writings). Utter skepticism leads us into darkness

The utter skeptic is left with nihilism. There is no meaning. Life turns blue, loses its meaning, and it loses its color because it's losing its life. But I am also meaning that we get the "blues." It is a depressing sort of existence. Therefore, the first "blues brother" is life. The other blues brother is death, as nihilism breathes life into it. Whereas life goes on living as though it's dead, death, like a zombie, is animated as though it is alive. For death is a certainty – and perhaps a nihilist's ultimate hope – but certainly their ultimate end.

The nihilist's only certainty – other than perhaps their mere existence – is that they will one day die. When there are only one or two things that can be considered certainties or truths, they are worth latching on to. In a morbid way, the nihilist must take comfort in the certainty of their demise. They exist to exit the scene.

These utter skeptics question so much, they miss out on the beauty of truth that doesn't rely on absolute certainty, and the beauty that comes from a faith in an ordered creation. They do this to uphold truth – as though a truth that carries 100% certainty is the goal of life. What truth taught them to pursue such a philosophy? Their unwarranted philosophy – a philosophy of which they don't know with 100% certainty should be pursued – is pursued by them unto ruin. If they dwell on it, it must be depressing. Their one hope is ultimately their one certainty - that this depression will end soon – with them. Or will it?



## Denton's Directions

# Centered (Christianity)

We seek to change the world in sundry ways  
We all seek our own locus of control  
We search within and find an end to reign  
Then bow to it, sacrifice, and extol

But ends imposed are really just restraints  
A good embraced, but smothering – not free  
Each isolated good partners with pain  
Establishing self-**centered** polity

But the servant-master came low to feast  
He upheld the law while changing its heart  
Inside his kingdom's walls he kept the least  
Then with his message told them to depart

The gospel leaves no one and no good out  
And about our fallen state leaves no doubt

“Centered” was actually the last poem I wrote in this series, but I decided to place it first as a glimpse and a summary of what is to come. This poem is about the uniqueness of Christianity and how it calls us to approach change in the world. In this poem I make an argument for what that looks like compared to how most of us go about that. In the following poems I will elaborate more on the faulty human systems.

Politics seems to be the way most of us seek to change the world. If you want to get anything accomplished on a large, meaningful scale, you have to legislate it to some degree. Whether one seeks negative legislation (restricting something e.g. make heroine illegal) or positive legislation (making something permissible, e.g. make gay marriage legal), we seek ultimate change in the world through the government. There are a large number of governmental systems in place, and many have some glaring weaknesses that accompany their strengths. But by and large, our approach to politics is fairly simple. Humans – as individuals and as societies – choose an end that is particularly valuable to them, then worship that value as a god. They will do anything to lift up or to save face for their political party or system.

The main problem is that all systems tend to isolate ends that in and of themselves may not be bad, but taken without its counterbalance, morphs into a monster. These good ends, then, become restraining rather than freeing. Rather than making us who we were meant to be, they confine us to worship them. As we sacrifice more and more to the alter of our isolated ideology, we become more defensive and self-centered as an individual or as a party or nation.

This is the stanza where I summarize all of the political ideologies I will single out and show how Christ did not isolate any of these ideals, but rather embodied them all. Jesus Christ humbled himself by coming to Earth as a human, but at the same time, he came feasting (for which others chastised him). These points resonate with my discussion on Elitism and Anarchism. Christ – the master of all – chose to use his authority to submit in love. At the same time, he partook in pleasures, particularly social pleasures. Christ also upheld the law while reemphasizing the heart of the law. This compares to Liberalism and Conservatism. It is possible to love law and guidelines while loving people. Finally, I relate Christ’s actions to isolationism and technocracies. Christ sought to protect and preserve those who were lower in society, and he even instituted the church – a place of extreme community. But at the same time, he was unwilling that his church hunker down and separate itself from communication with the world. He sent his church out to make progress all over the world. I understand that some of these aspects don’t directly relate on the surface, but I believe they do at the core. Where we value freedom like the anarchist, Christ promises that we are free in him – that all strata of society are equal. Where we desire pleasure, like the elitist, Christ promises that one day we won’t cry and that we will feast in peace. Where we desire to uphold the law and tradition, like conservatives, God promises that not one piece of it will fall away, as God himself is immutable and his words infallible. Where we desire to see change in the world and change in the hearts of others, like liberals, God promises to give us the fruit of the spirit and to finish the good work he started in us. He promises that his word will not return void. Where we seek wisdom and knowledge and life, like the technocrat, God promises us wisdom if we pray and life everlasting if we follow him. Where we seek a close-knit community of preservation of life and things, like the isolationist, God provides for us through the establishment of the church here on earth, with the promise to perfect it in his ultimately established kingdom. I believe these desires and ends are very representative of some of our major human aspirations and structures.

The gospel of Jesus Christ does not isolate goods, it encompasses them all, as well as encompassing all people and all classes of people. In fact, it is this balancing act through dichotomy (antinomy) that makes Christianity unique and validates it in some ways. See Appendix 1 for a summary of Chesterton’s brilliant thoughts on this. At the same time, this picture of the ultimate good also shows us how imperfect and fallen we are.

## \*Left (Liberalism)

Nature is often cruel and disengaged  
Humans, engaged, but purposing to harm  
One brings death and uncertainty to all  
The other, injustice only to some

Yet there are those who acknowledge all ills  
The chance of birth and man's malignity  
They seek those who have **left** their forbear's guilt  
So all, made lustrous, can shine dignity

But these whose goal is change will also fail  
As change for change's sake makes sundry ills  
Driven by fickle whims of their nature  
With hatred for those of contrary will

Change made an end will never reconcile  
But as a means, reform's our domicile

In the first stanza I address the presence of natural and moral evil. Natural evil is the occurrence of bad things that happen as a result of natural forces (hurricanes, tornadoes, accidents, etc). Natural evil will befall every human if they live long enough. If we experience nothing until our final day on Earth, we will eventually succumb to a natural death. Natural evil is no respecter of persons. It attacks the rich and the poor, the just and the unjust. To show this “randomness” in natural evil, I did not rhyme the first and third lines that refer to natural evil. Moral evil is like natural evil in the sense that it is something bad that occurs, but it is unlike natural evil in that moral evil is purposed. When someone lies to you, rips you off, attacks you, or kills – these are purposed actions directed towards another individual and towards God. Moral evil is selective. The rich exploit the poor. The warlord exploits the weak. Moral evil is unjust not only in its offense towards an individual, but also in the sense that it is discriminatory.

The persuasion of the left, for me, is their gracious acknowledgement of both moral and natural evil. The left understands the chance of birth – the child born in the ghetto who has no chance at good schooling or the child raised in an abusive home. They understand that evil befalls all of us and that we need grace to overcome our circumstances. Many on the right don’t see this. The right thinks that everyone should just pick themselves up by their own bootstraps. They think those who have made immoral decisions are compromised (unless it’s a candidate on their ticket). Grace, mercy, and redemption often reside more with the left than with the right and I find the compassion on the left far more appealing than the hypocrisy and immobilizing arrogance on the right.

G.K. Chesterton does a great job in his book “Orthodoxy” on discussing conservatives and progressives. One of the quotes I really like is, “Progress should mean that we are always changing the world to fit the vision, instead we are always changing the vision.” Chesterton points out that the major problem with progressives is their changing of the vision. Progress becomes the end rather than the means. This creates a cyclical problem where issues are never solved, humanity is not loved, and morality is not clung to because the metric is ever changing. In fact, this fickle nature that drives the forces of nature to harm is also the driving force behind progressives. If there is no fixed standard and morality, then the morals and goals of the day are based on the whims of the people or the whims of those in charge. Those whims often include hatred for others. In the end, progressives find that the natural and moral evil they attempt to fight are actually the very things they embody.

When change is our goal rather than people and an immovable moral metric, we will never have true, progressive, lasting reform. But when it is a means towards a fixed end, it will reform the place that is our home and make it a true home for all.

# Right (Conserbatism)

Progress always means leaving things behind  
Pleasure, purpose, familiarity  
But more than this, progress dilutes the mind  
Loosed values for a moral anarchy

But some stand **right**, unmoved by each new fad  
Mem'ries to them seem better than the mind  
Their major goal, preserve that which is past  
What has been has lead us up to this time

But who can trust those who gloss o'er what's been?  
Neighbor's plight forsook for their ancestors  
And who can trust those who garden with sin?  
Wayward's demise their truth's fertilizer

Standing firm is not immobility  
It's moving forward with grace, love, and peace.

For the liberal, stagnation and the archaic are threats. Change and progress are the value. For the conservative, however, change and progress are often words loaded with threat. The conservative recognizes that when the physical or social landscape change, there are usually other intangible social and moral changes that accompany them. Conservatives recognize that their forbears had certain moral and social notions that lead them to create that which has lead to now. We know what that system and that process gets us, so they want to conserve it (this is why many conservatives are often a majority population, as the oppressed in society want change whereas the majority who are doing well don't want to change things and risk being harmed).

The main problems with conservatism is that conservation preserves the good with the bad. The majority doesn't want to pay more taxes and they don't want their tax money to go to poor kids so they can have equal schooling. The majority doesn't want everyone to have equal access to healthcare, they want to keep access based on who has the most money so they can pay up and not have to wait in lines, which they'd most certainly have to do if all those poorer than them had the same access. The majority doesn't want to face the truths of racial damages and reconciliation that are a result of their forbear's decisions. The majority, those who are conservative simply want to maintain their good position. Conservatives are often willing to forsake those in immediate need for the sake of preserving their tradition.

But how can we trust a group who gardens in the present with a blind eye to the seeds they are propagating? They're gardening with the tradition of men and women in the past, but all of those men and women were fallen. Conservatism tends to prop up the leaders and ideologies from the past as infallible. Just look at what we have done with the Founding Fathers. But beginning with the first humans, sin was present. To propagate with a blind eye the seeds of those who have fallen before us is to garden with sin and error. We must always be ready to find, acknowledge, and fix – to progress.

While conservatism resonates with me because of the flaws inherent in its opposite, I definitely recognize its flaws. The biggest flaw is that it lacks a willingness to change and be accepting because of fear. But perfect love casts out fear. Whereas conservatives are immobile and stuck in their ways for the sake of tradition and fear, the Christian recognizes that standing firm means to stand firm in Christ – in love. We Christians move forward with grace, love, and peace to reconcile and edify.

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## \*Up (Elitism/Plutocracy)

From eons past, even unto today  
Most have found themselves in grip of despair  
Assured only of life's toil and death's pain  
A vapid life, a vapor in the air

But each generation sees some rise **up**  
Seemingly above all the pain and toil  
Securing life so no surprise irrupts  
Hoarding pleasures, one's end, which this life foils

But who makes an end of fleeting feelings?  
Whose momentary joy ledgers one's grief  
Death comes for all, security stealing  
Suckers deboned by rots sharp knife unsheathed

We can't justify end as pleasure's state  
If all we know is a form of decay



Life is short and the only guarantees are pain and toil. It seems like the goal for most is to mitigate these things. We try to struggle less and have as much pleasure and as little pain as possible. The last sentence of the second stanza has a double meaning. First, it means that painful and toilsome life foils pleasure. It makes pleasure look even better than it is because of the contrast. This is the original meaning of the sentence. At the same time, the hidden meaning is that this life foils, as in hinders, our end of pleasure seeking. While it attempts to do so all along the way of our lives, it ultimately succeeds in full when it takes our lives in death. Having pleasure as an end is shallow, temporary, and ultimately unattainable.

Pleasure as an end just doesn't work. It is so fickle and fleeting. Here I use "ledger" in two senses. In the first sense, it is used like an accountant and it is used in a questioning sense. How can joy cancel out all of life's grief? The books just don't add up. Pleasure as an end doesn't even out. The second way I use "ledger" is in a fishing sense, as a statement. These individuals use pleasure to ledger grief. They try to cancel it out by sinking it to the bottom of the lake.

Keeping with the fishing theme, I point out why pleasure is irrelevant. It doesn't cancel anything out as it doesn't negate the ultimate horror of death. Feeding into this faulty notion makes you a sucker.

Reiterating, everything we know with our senses is in a state of decay or entropy. Everything will dissipate. Pleasure as an end just doesn't hold up. I'm not at all being gnostic here. I'm not saying flesh/material is bad, but that in and of itself it is no end. There is more. Our grasping at pleasure hints at the good – food, drink, sex, etc. But there is more than this, where we will be eternally satisfied in relationship.

# Down (Anarchism)

Humanity's a self-int' rested race  
No different, really, than animal kin  
When given power to domineer one's place  
Without fail, the oppression then begins

Yet try as the strong might to grasp at pow'r  
There are some who will try to bring them **down**  
Authority, stripped, does not make one cower  
Oppression does not come without a crown

As nice as this ideal thought may seem  
It seems the idea's not been thought through  
For power stripped won't dissipate, as steam  
With lust for power all hearts are shot through

Power, evil – always materialize  
For evil in us all is centralized

You don't have to look very hard to find the truth that people are as vicious as animals, and even more so in many cases. ISIS, Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge, Mao, Stalin, Hitler, the Serbian genocide, the Rwandan genocide, the Rape of Nanking, etc. And those are just a few of the most horrific examples in the past one hundred years. Wherever you have a human who is given power and control over others, they will use that for their benefit and to the harm of others.

While anarchists are looked down upon as rebels or as those who want to rip society apart, I don't think you can look at the other viewpoints (liberal, conservative, etc) and say that they are necessarily better. The liberal rips the moral fabric of society apart because they take away an objective standard for a shifting one. The conservative voices a consistent moral standard, but is blind to any evil their predecessors infused into this moral system and is willing to let the minority continue to suffer because the conservative is unwilling to seek change. The anarchist doesn't trust systems, and for good reason. The anarchist's solution is to take power out of the hands of governments and systems

The main problem with anarchism is that evil doesn't spawn as a result of governments or power. That is often where we see evil play out, and the form of government will often dictate the methods one uses to oppress others. But this evil is simply an outworking of evil in individual hearts. If you take the government away, you don't reduce oppression, you just decentralize it. I think post-apocalyptic shows like "The Walking Dead," "Mad Max," "The Book of Eli," etc, all show what the world would likely be like with a decentralized government. You'd just end up with smaller seats of power where individuals or small groups have taken over an area. Afghanistan, anyone? We'd just end up with warlords.

Decentralizing the government would decentralize evil from the nation, but the problem is that evil is at the core of our very being – in each and every one of us.

# Forward: (Technocracy)

Were Newton to know all that we know now  
Or Einstein live to be three times his age  
Would we be trapped in ignorance's slough?  
Would we still be captive to time and space?

Moving forward now in the vast expanse  
Heading toward darkened life and darkened mind  
Our only solace is hope at the chance  
That life and knowledge become undefined

But don't you know that a limitless life  
Is only different in quantity?  
Have you not taken enough time to find  
Knowledge only observes, it does not be?

An endless life where everything is known  
Remains empty until purpose is shown

Some see the problem of humanity as a lack of knowledge and opportunity. If we only know more and if we only implement science to a greater degree then our problems would be solved. One of the main problems to our gaining of knowledge, however, is our limited life. If great minds like Einstein and Newton were to have been around to build their knowledge for centuries, where would we be now in terms of our knowledge and discoveries? Perhaps we would have reached the pinnacle of our intellect.

All humans are headed towards death and permanent ignorance – a darkened life and a darkened mind (at least from a humanist perspective). The goal, then, is to seek infinite existence and intellect. This is the main crux of the transhumanist movement who seeks to upload our brains to machines so we can live forever and build our knowledge.

While there are many problems with this approach, one of the most glaring issues is the assumption that more knowledge and more time alive are the formula for creating purpose and meaning. Knowledge and years are quantitative sorts of things, not qualitative. To know more and to live longer does nothing in and of itself to the quality of our existence. The true end, then, is discovering what it is to be – to be human. [See Appendices 2 and 3 for some more thoughts on these notions of purpose].

## \*Backwards: (Isolationism)

One who decides to keep all their treasure  
Never escapes the harm of another  
For robbers here abound in great measure  
And rust destroys as time slowly smothers

But some retreat backwards to their stronghold  
Bolstering their defenses, keeping watch  
For if no one ever leaves their abode  
Or lets another in – what can go wrong?

But treasure buried is treasure not used  
And treasure hoarded for self does no good  
As all will one day be by time abused  
And all will soon by their lender be judged

Isolation never preserves one's wealth  
It only ensures destruction of self



This is supposed to be reminiscent of Matthew where it discusses storing up our treasure in heaven where moth and rust can't corrupt, and where thieves can't break in and steal. On Earth, all that we accrue will be taken or destroyed during our lifetime or after it.

Some have created the strategy of building walls around their lives and choosing never to leave their fortress of isolation.

There are several problems with being an isolationist. First, what good is it to have treasure that just sits around? Can it really be enjoyed if it is, for the most part, not used? Second, nobody's treasure will escape time. While we may prevent others from taking our goods, time will one day erase everything we own. The great poem "Ozymandius" does a great job of painting the picture of such vain futility. Finally, not only is isolationism empty and futile, but it is detrimental. We are stewards of our goods and will one day be judged by our progeny and our God for what we did with what we had.

Our goal is to build a legacy and store up everlasting treasure. Isolationists invest nothing and end up losing absolutely everything at the end of their lives. Destruction is ensured to all, and only those who use their goods and talents to invest will have anything left over in eternity. In fact, Hell is likely filled with those who are isolationists to some extent. As C. S. Lewis said, I believe Hell has its gates locked from the inside. It is filled with those who are self-centered and unwilling to look beyond themselves. Heaven, however, is filled with those who seek relationship and community.

Jemma Jayne's Gems

## \*Onyx

Words our minds hear are often left unsaid  
Enlightened thoughts only see light of night  
Divorced from ideal, to cynic wed  
Our grounded beings never taking flight

In painful world most seek only pleasure  
Juxtaposed lives, like black and white onyx  
Living subjectively in great measure  
Those who seek to find life in cryonics

But facing life means not avoiding pain  
As we defend the clean from the besmirched  
To courage we retreat from the inane  
To battle fallen demons who are perched

Christ's illocution is not vacuous  
The cross is and is not precipitous

[Mt. 5:1-12 and Mt. 7:13-29] Onyx has a number of variations, but the one which I refer to here is the black and white style onyx. It was difficult to get a common theme for its use in mythology, but it seemed that a quelling of fear and pain were common. It was thought to give courage in Rome (or take away fear of death and injury), give eloquence in Europe (or take away fear of being humiliated), and taking away or dampening pain in childbirth as well as quell sexual lust. It was also thought to be able to contain evil spirits. In all of these senses, onyx seems to be a depressive sort of material towards particular emotions and entities.

Here I thought back to my poem “The Unspoken” (see Appendix 8). Most of the things we hear in our head throughout the day are left unsaid. While this may sometimes be good, there are many lovely thoughts we have which never see the light of day – only the dark of night - because we are too timid to share them with others.

In our embracing of the fallen world as it is, rather than the ideal that it should be (and will be as God restores it), we refuse to live as God intends for us to live. A Christian realist may understand that an ideal will never be realized until Christ’s return, at least in terms of the effects. However, they understand that God calls us to live as idealists, with faith and reliance on him for the means.

We are most averse to the sensation of pain and are highly tuned into the presence of pain in our world. We seek to distance ourselves from this as much as possible. Our aversion to pain and attraction to pleasure means that even if something is good, but painful, we will avoid it (e.g. exercise, the way of God, healthy food), and if something feels good, but is harmful, we will indulge (e.g. alcohol, nicotine, drugs, junk food, etc).

People seek the perpetuation of pleasure so much that they attempt to become immortal. One way modern humans try to do this is through cryonics (not to be confused with cryogenics, which is the science of studying cold temperatures). Cryonics seeks to freeze human bodies and then resurrect them when their lives can be healed so they live longer. In fact, as molecules approach colder and colder temperatures, nearing Absolute 0, they move less and less until they completely stop. In this great irony, individuals prematurely embrace death, “living” as a frozen corpse for who knows how long. While this may subjectively be what some individuals call “living,” it doesn’t seem like living to me. It’s empty. Seek and find are also intended to allude to the real way we’re supposed to seek and find in Matthew 5-7.

But true life isn’t the avoidance of pain. Rather, it’s the promotion and upholding of that which is clean and good, defending what is true, real, and ideal from that which defiles and corrupts. Even if it means pain for me, upholding what is good is what gives meaning to life. That to which we adhere and obey shows where our hope and love lie. If we lose the fabric of objective good, we lose everything, because we lose the source of objective good with it.

This references two of the myths of onyx (courage and trapping demons). As we fight for the holy and good, we move away from all that is inane, and we fight our battle not against flesh and blood, but against the demonic. These devils prey on us as they perpetuate their false dichotomy of pleasure and pain (similar to Lewis’s demonic dichotomy in the “Great Divorce), and we must fight them.

Jesus had three illocutions to which I’m referring (a promise, a command, and a warning). First, he commands believers. He commands us to follow him, to take up our crosses, etc. Second, he warns us of how serious it is to deny him. If we deny him, he will deny us. Finally, he promises that those who follow him and seek his Kingdom will be provided for and receive eternal rewards.

Taking up our cross and following Jesus can be precipitous in two ways. First, it is a very steep and dangerous path, filled with hardship and pain. While the world’s view is that such a path should be avoided, we must climb it to victory. Second, the way of the cross is often precipitous in that there are many dangers. There are many goats on the path, heading for judgment. The path to destruction is wide and many choose that path. In this sense, many who choose to say they follow Christ are nominal. They make a precipitous – not well thought out and damning – commitment and end up falling off the precipitous heights.

To mimic the juxtaposition seen visually in onyx, I created a verbal juxtaposition in each line. Every line has at least two words which have opposing meanings, images, or ideas associated with them. 1) hears/unsaid, 2) enl~~ighted~~ened/light/night, 3) divorced/wed, 4) grounded/flight, 5) painful/pleasure, 6) black/white, 7)

subjectively/measure, 8) seek/find, 9) facing/avoiding, 10) clean/besmirched, 11) courage/retreat, 12) fallen/perched,  
13) illocution/vacuous, 14) is/is not

# \*Amber

Desert browns, palette formed where there's no rain  
A sign of lifelessness and compromise  
Same for those amidst amber waves - the grain  
Where life and living are dichotomized

But God made us, when we're rubbed up against  
To polarize ourselves in shocking ways  
Not to build and electrify a fence  
But attract opposites with our displays

So build your city high upon a hill  
A Kingdom outpost, not a nation-state  
For true citizenship can't be distilled  
As salt's no longer salt without its taste

Flavor and brightness should draw others in  
But only works if we're God's citizens

[Mt. 5:13-16 and Mt. 6:24]. Amber is a brownish stone which has long been recognized for its ability to become charged and exhibit the properties of static electricity. I use both of these properties throughout the poem.

The endless brown of the desert depicts a wasteland of life. Without vegetation there is no visible life, but only that which cowers away hiding from the elements for the majority of the day. That which does live in the desert must compromise with its environment. Whereas a deer living in a temperate climate, like in Florida, can gather food all year long and come out and enjoy its surroundings year round, night or day – those in the desert are wholly shaped by their environment. While the various adaptations may look different, each animal is specifically adapted for their extreme environment. They are formed by the desert.

I change environments here from the desert to the United States. The first line here is supposed to allude to the “amber waves of grain” line in the song “God Bless America.” I’m talking about those who live in the land of these amber waves of grain (the USA). Whereas the song references this as a beautiful thing, the idea of amber should connect back to the brown referenced earlier, which depicts lifelessness and desert. I also change the words from “of grain” to “the grain” because I also want to ensure that the ones I’m speaking of here are those who not only live in the USA, but rather those who live there and live with or go with the grain. I am not therefore necessarily speaking badly of the USA, but rather those who, like the desert animals, are shaped by the vacuous culture around them. I simply use the States because that’s my frame of reference. While conformers to culture may technically be alive, and while their adaptations and compromises may help to sustain their life, in some senses we could argue that they aren’t truly living. They don’t live a fulfilled life. Like animals in the desert who are bound to their environment and aren’t truly free, so are those who live in a culturally compromised position and go along with Babylon. This could be said of any culture.

When amber is rubbed on the right material, the atoms polarize in their alignment which creates static electricity. Children of God, when confronted with or rubbed up against by culture are to do the same. We are not to conform, but are rather to be polarized and distinguished from it.

When I argue that we should be polarized, I don’t mean that in a pejorative or escapist sense. We aren’t to cause conflict and remove ourselves from the world. Rather, our polarization – how uniquely and beautifully we are set apart – should be something those living in the desert of Babylon are attracted to. Our polarization is not something meant to distance ourselves, but something that is meant to draw others in. We don’t use our religious standards to build electric fences around God and community, keeping others out. In this sense, “a fence” is meant to also mean “offense.” Rather we use our electrical powers to stimulate and pull others towards us.

This is a specific reference to Matthew 5 and the idea of a city on a hill. We are not primarily members of Babylon – our individual country or nation-state. We are citizens of the Kingdom. The city we build is not a city in or for our humanly created nation, but for our heavenly nation. Our citizenship is in heaven and as Christ makes the nations his footstool, we are to be the outposts of that Kingdom that are beginning to convert human citizenship into heavenly citizenship.

This citizenship of heaven isn’t dual citizenship. We aren’t equally citizens of two places. We are primarily citizens of heaven. There can be no compromise (see I Peter for a great look at this). While we submit to rulers in our nation-states, we only obey and follow the Kingdom. To distill our allegiance at all to the Kingdom is to cause our saltiness to lose it’s flavor (another Matthew 5 allusion). If we attempt to distill our citizenship – to separate the salt of the Kingdom from the water of this world, you end up with two separate products, only one of which has saltiness. The Kingdom is all or nothing. We cannot serve two masters. If we are members of the Kingdom, we are to be salt in this world, but our identity is not dichotomous. We are not of this world – we are not water. We are only salt. As Peter says, we are aliens in this world.

To be a bright city or tasty salt is only possible if we recognize our true and only citizenship. We can’t draw others to God by being a “Christian nation.” We draw others in by living the Kingdom and drawing them into that and refusing to be any nation other than Christ’s nation. The nations in which we live are accidental properties (philosophically meaning properties which are “not necessary”) which matter very little and have no ultimate meaning for who we are or who we are to be.

# \*Turquoise

In past fire rained down from the heavens  
God's judgment administered to the damned  
Coals of fire only way to God's presence  
To law, judgment, and pain God didst remand

But no asceticism like Tolstoy's  
Could ever protect or deliver us  
And even totem of heavn'ly turquoise  
Becomes debased as sin effloresces

Where then can we look for our pirouzeh?  
We look to him whose eyes are flaming fire  
And patiently await Parousia  
When Son of Man exacts all that's required

With confident boldness we now then pray  
Seeking God's Kingdom come until The Day



[Mt. 5:17-20 and Mt. 6:5-15]. In the Old Testament we read about God's extreme holiness. We see a number of instances of fire raining down from heaven in judgment. Even for God's people, his holiness was extreme. We see in Isaiah that God placed a burning coal on his lips to purify him. The old vision of God was one of a consuming fire. Apart from the cases of God's judgment, as in Sodom and Gomorrah, or those directly entering God's presence, like Isaiah, we also see images of the coals (or the fire) of animal sacrifice the Israelites went through in order to purify themselves before a holy God.

In Galatians 3 Paul says, "23 Before the coming of this faith, [1] we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. 24 So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian." This old system is what guided us, though imperfectly, until a new system was established.

Leo Tolstoy was an advocate of extreme asceticism. The law tended to drive people to a similar sort of path as seen in the asceticism of the Pharisses in Jesus's day. But such a system doesn't work.

Turquoise supposedly protected its wearer. A sign of impending danger was that the color of the turquoise would change. Turquoise was often a religious totem viewed as imparting protection.

There's a lot going on here. 1) The straightforward meaning is that whatever heavenly protection one thought they gained through their totem, sin is a corrupting force present in all of us. Sin is contrary to that which is from heaven. 2) "Effloresce" is a chemical term which means for crystals to form on a substance. This often happens through evaporation, and typically produces the formation of salts. In this sense, I am tapping into the idea of a color, hue, or tone change in our turquoise. When sin is present, it signifies impending harm or doom. 3) I use a lot of terms which one should associate with chemistry. Beyond "effloresce," the word "asceticism" should trigger the close word "acetic," as in acetic acid, as many often mistakenly call asceticism "aceticism." Debased should trigger the thought of bases. When you mix an acid (acetic) with a base you get water and a salt. In this sense, I am saying that asceticism (an acid) mixed with sin debasing (a base) creates a perfect combination for our destruction. It was this combination which created the hardest of hearts not in prostitutes and sinners, but in the religious elite.

Turquoise was known as or associated with "pirouzeh" by the Persians (who lived in a land where turquoise was abundant), which means "victory." They would use it on their armor and weapons.

This is a reference to the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man – Jesus Christ – as seen in Daniel and Revelation. Our victory is not in our asceticism, but in the victory of Christ.

The "Parousia" is a theological term for Christ's return in judgment, which is also when he comes in final victory (as in pirouzeh). When he returns he will separate the sheep from the goats, all hay and stubble will be burned while precious metals are refined, and evil will be no more. This is our hope.

Because of Christ's assured victory, we should pray in bold confidence. We don't pray because it merits us anything, but because God's Kingdom is assured and we want it to be on earth just as it is in heaven. We patiently await the Day of the Lord when all will be made right.

# Amethyst

The rage of red will rails against the wrong  
While banality to blue will's bequeathed  
The first seeks to cut short another's song  
Latter never incisiveness unsheathes

But when bled together, these reds and blues  
A royal color's beckoned to come forth  
Majestic depth construed in purple hues  
Dominion comes through sobriety's force

A sober-minded one will never hate  
Nor allow good opportunity missed  
For sobriety sees as clear as day  
Cutting through the fog as does amethyst

The one given to strong drink or passions  
Never creates - only themselves fashioned

[Mt. 5:21-26]. Amethyst is a purple gem once thought to provide sobriety while drinking, clarity while looking into the future, and was a beautiful purple – the color of royalty.

Here I juxtapose the colors red and blue. Red is often associated with anger and is a hot, vibrant, open color. Blue, on the other hand, is often associated with the “blues,” and is a colder color. Whereas red here is symbolized as attacking, blue is symbolized as representing passivity.

I expound here on the first two lines, more in regard to anger and passivity than to the colors. Anger, hatred, and aggressiveness seek to “end another’s song,” representative of killing another – whether that’s directly through murder or indirectly through hatred. Others are an object in our way which must be stopped. Jesus told us that to hate is to kill, as both seek the undoing of a human impediment through objectification. For the passivity, I use a word play with “incisiveness.” To “incise” means to cut. Incisiveness here means perceptive or smart. One who refuses to engage the world never whips out their intellect in order to address the world’s problems. They simply sit back. So when I say they never “unsheathe” their incisiveness, it is meant to play off the root of the word which can imply cutting, as one would normally unsheathe a sharp object, like a sword. In this sense, the blue and red are the antitheses of each other, with one signifying aggression and the other inaction. This notion also plays on the idea of anger. When we think of anger we usually think of weapons and physical aggression. However, while the angry one here is chided for wanting to harm another, the passive one here is chided for not unsheathing their intellect and will. The middle ground, then, will be that we must be aggressive in this world, but not with weapons seeking physical harm. Our battle is not with flesh and blood.

I continue with the violent imagery here as I reference “bled together.” Blue and red together make purple, which is historically the color of royalty. So when we mix our aggression or assertiveness with our willingness to hold back, we get the perfect combination. This is what subjects of the Kingdom, or rulers who will judge angels (as Paul calls us), will do. We are royal ambassadors of the Kingdom of God.

One who is angry and aggressive does not have dominion over the world as God intended. They do not rule the world, but are rather ruled by their emotions. They don’t tend and keep, as God described the way their dominion should be. Instead, they seek, subjugate, and destroy out of selfish ambition and vain conceit. Likewise, one who is not assertive does not have dominion as God intended, for they assert their reign over nothing. Dominion comes through sobriety – clear thinking uncompromised by any substance (e.g. alcohol) or action (e.g. lack of sleep) which would cloud our ability to move forward in wisdom.

Amethyst was thought by some ancients to help cut the effects of alcohol and produce sobriety. It was also thought at times to help have clarity in seeing the future.

Living in anger and aggression or indulgent passivity means one does not have dominion. Rather than being creators or individuals who better the world, they are controlled by the world in which they live. These individuals are fashioned by their environment and circumstances. But our call as Christians is to have dominion over the world using the means God intended.

# \*Emerald

Erin, fair maiden whom all do admire  
Wielding a power few will ever know  
Power to allure all harbored desire  
Power to smite with a look, all her foes

But Erin's fair beauty was taken when  
Men in God's image inverted His plan  
Objectifying others, which therein  
Moulded their God in the image of man

Now rest your eyes not upon Erin's breast  
Nor upon that which you think she could give  
Just rest your eyes upon that which attests  
Your equal stands before you and God lives

Rest weary eyes upon this emerald  
And heed divine image others herald

[Mt. 5:27-32]. I found two interesting attributes ascribed to emeralds throughout history. One is that they are able to help the wearer cut through infatuation (usually to see or hear the truth when speaking to a lover), and they were thought to be peaceful to gaze upon and helped the eyes to rest.

Erin represents two things. First, it represents a beautiful young woman. The inherent beauty of this woman is power, in that it draws out the deepest passions and desires of many who gaze upon her. Figuratively she can smite them with her looks, but this can also be literal. Others may be willing to kill for her out of their passions. The second thing meant by “Erin” is “Ireland.” I’ll expound on this more a little later, but Erin is actually a name the Irish have used for Ireland, particularly in their poetry (sometimes spelled slightly differently). Ireland is also known as the “Emerald Isle.” In this sense, “Erin” also stands for the “Emerald Isle,” which not only incorporates the picture of emeralds into the poem, but brings us to a different level of passions and infatuation. While people may kill and lust over a beautiful woman, many will also kill and lust over the power a country holds. This should be readily apparent in today’s environment which is rife with nationalism...I mean patriotism.

There is a lot going on in this stanza.

1) The second and fourth lines of this stanza are almost a direct quote from William Drennan’s poem, “When Erin First Rose.” It was in this poem in which Ireland was first referred to in print as “The Emerald Isle.” The poem is wonderful and I highly recommend you read it. The lines I used can be found in the last two lines of the second stanza. You can find it here: <https://www.libraryireland.com/CIL/DrennanErin.php>.

2) This stanza argues that this beauty and power possessed by Erin (the power of women or the power of authority and dominion particularly of a nation, depending on which way you’re reading it) has been corrupted. Beauty and dominion are not bad things. In fact, we see both prior to Genesis 3 and the fall of humanity. However, rather than allowing God to define what is good and respect his parameters, we have defiled his creation. Rather than admire the beauty of woman or the dominion we are supposed to assert through servanthood, we invert the image of God in others and corrupt the way we image God to creation. Instead of bowing to God and acknowledging his image, we fashion idols of God made in our own image. Instead of living in an upside down kingdom, we build a kingdom around ourselves. As we set ourselves up as gods, we objectify all else for our benefit.

3) I Corinthians 11 tells us that woman is the glory of man. While many patriarchists have taken this to mean some sort of subordinationism in that it places women under men, I hold to the view that this elevates women. While women, like men, are humans who bear God’s image, women also have the added attribute of blessing man (since Eve was taken out of Adam). In this sense, women are doubly beautiful, reflecting the one by whom they were created (God) and the one from whom they came out of (man). From “Paul and Gender,” “‘Woman is the glory of man’ is actually a positive evaluation of women and indicates a high status, because she is both the image and glory of God, and she has such additional beauty that she is the glory of humanity. She is the glory of man by virtue of the fact that she was created from him, and that is why her glory, her beauty, reflects on him.” Women were created as the glory of man and it was only after the fall, in the curse, where it was described (not prescribed) that men would subject women as inferiors. This subjugation and treatment as unequal is an inversion of God’s image reflected equally in all of humanity, regardless of race, status, or gender.

4) While this subjugation of others is a direct reference to male/female relations in Genesis, we see the same thing play out on a higher authoritative level in government. Rather than faithfully and uncompromisingly serve, we domineer and use force to make others follow our will, which is generally self-interested. Selfishness abounds in all systems, but in a democratic, capitalistic, and materialistic system it is encouraged and perpetuated not only in the aristocracy who seek their own interest, but in every individual who is told to vote, purchase, and live by the guiding light of self-interest.

This stanza is pretty straightforward. We are not to objectify others and utilize power for self-interest. We are to recognize the image of God borne by others.

Referencing one of the supposed powers of an emerald – to give one’s eyes rest and clarity through passions – I am saying that we need to simply gaze upon the emerald. We need to just allow it to be and not objectify it. The opposite of objectifying would be to subjectify. What I mean by that is instead of turning something into an object of my subjective desires and goals, I allow the subject upon which I gaze to declare its own image. So as we look at

women, men, children, government, or any other group or form of power, we must always do so with a clarity that cuts through our passions, self-interest, and objectification. We must recognize and heed God as declared through his image bearers rather than attempting to fashion and form God into our image. We do not import our desires upon others. That is objectification. We allow others to shine their light and reflect their image to us. We are observers of other image bearers, not creators. There is so much more I'd love to write here, particularly as it relates to how I see Drennan's poem represented here – both where my poem complements his ideas as well as where we differ. He talks about a lot of things I could pull out, like mercy, vengeance, bigotry, etc. But I'll leave it at this for now. For more on objectification, see Appendix 9.

## \*Diamond

On ancient day upon which Adam fell  
Tears of fallen gods rained down like diamonds  
Their laughter deigned to men unto flood's swell  
A flash of wrath against sounding sirens

Harsh judgment once befell those rebellious  
Save for those who had faith in ark of wood  
Same salvation holds true for those today  
Who hark in faith him who in their place stood

But warnings stand for those refusing beck  
Those who do not confess all they've done wrong  
For they who seek to judge another's speck  
Will fail to rise and meet perfection's slog

Let words spoken be as soft as they're true  
Or mosey to judgment, your fate to hew

[Mt. 5:33-37 and Mt. 7:1-5]. There are many diamond associations I'll get to later, but the important starting point is that diamonds are said to have been used by Jewish high priests to help in judging. They were specifically used to help judge truthfulness and falsity, as diamonds were said to shine more if someone was telling the truth. For this reason I use it to refer to Matthew on judgment and truthfulness (specifically in contexts of judgment or legal issues).

There are two double meanings in this line. First, Adam fell on an ancient day in the sense that he fell a long time ago. However, it also means that he dashed his foot or came up against the Ancient of Days, another name for God. His offense occurred long ago and it was against the Ancient of Days. The other double meaning lies in Adam. Adam literally means Adam, but it also is a reference to diamond, which gets its name from the Greek "adamas," meaning invincible. This second meaning gives the first line an ironic twist in that our Adam was far from invincible. Even that which appears invincible cannot stand against our God.

The Greeks believed diamonds were tears of the gods and Romans believed they came from falling stars. I hit on both of those concepts in this line. Using a Divine Council motif which understands the multiple uses of plural "elohim" in the Old Testament to be referencing a divine council of beings (though none divine or uncreated as God is), I here refer to the "gods." When Adam fell, the gods wept. Some, those who followed God, wept for sadness. But here I talk about the fallen gods. These are the ones who followed Satan in rebellion and were rooting for humanity's demise. In the ancient world, stars were thought to be divine beings. Some argue that in certain places in scripture where we see the stars falling, it is a reference to fallen angels. Whether that's true or not, it is a commonly held belief and one I'm running with here, though not necessarily supporting. So in this sense, the tears of the gods cover Greek thought on diamonds, and the fallen gods (or fallen stars, metaphorically) cover the Roman conception of diamonds as well as certain Jewish and Christian streams of thought.

One may ask in line three why the fallen gods would cry over Adam's fall. Here we see that they are tears of laughter, not sadness. This evil laughter continues until the time of Noah, as the demonic corrupted humanity even more (see Genesis 6 and the book of Enoch for specifics). Eventually, God withdrew his protection because the world was so out of control, and the waters of the deep once again encroached on the earth.

The "flash" here is meant to trigger back to the word "flood," as the flood suddenly came upon people. We also get a glimpse of this in the gospels where Jesus talks about the judgment being like the days of Noah, where one is suddenly taken while another is left. Sirens here means that the wrath is coming against the siren call of the demonic who enticed humanity from Adam onward. It is also a word indicating the warning of God's judgment through rebellion, as in a warning siren.

This is a reference back to the flood from the stanza before. Only those who put their faith in the ark (representing God's promise) were saved.

I Peter 3 references Noah and the salvation we have through baptism (representing Jesus as Peter goes on to explain, and as he set up in Chapter 1 as well). Noah is usually thought of as a type of Christ for a number of reasons you can look up. Christians today, like Noah, place their faith in Jesus, often represented by the wood of the cross.

This is an allusion to a book called "In My Place Condemned He Stood" by J.I. Packer and Mark Denver. The book is about penal substitutionary atonement. While I have come to believe that penal substitution is an incomplete picture of the atonement – just one of many facets (like a diamond) – substitution is certainly a part of the atonement. I am able to place my hope in the cross of Christ because Christ stands in for me in some way. He is my representative to whom my sins are imputed, and from whom is imputed righteousness to me. See N.T. Wright for some great discussions on the atonement.

"Beck" here, as in "beck and call." It signifies a gesture or invitation. Christ has gestured to us with the cross to come and dine with him and accept his offer of the Kingdom.

Those who fail to unburden their guilt in Christ and join his Kingdom are bound to the law. The law requires perfection – something no one can attain. To refuse Christ is to bind oneself to the slog (or tedious, continual work) of being perfect in following the law. It's an impossible and tedious path. "Slog" here is also intended to allude to the word "logs," as Matthew talks about not looking at the speck in another's eye, but taking out the log in one's



own eye first. Since “speck” was referred to in the previous line and “slog” is simply “logs” if you change the position of the “s,” the reader should get that allusion.

Our words, then, should be tempered with softness. Jesus talks often about forgiveness as stemming from the realization of how much we’ve been forgiven. Those who loved Jesus the most are those who had been forgiven the most. The prostitutes and tax collectors tended to be the most transformed. With such a realization, our judgment upon others – especially those outside the church (see I Cor. for this discussion) – should be loving and soft. It shouldn’t compromise truth, but it should compromise judgmentalism. What we say must always be true, as Christ discusses in his piece about oaths in Matthew 5. But true does not mean harsh. For more on forgiveness, see Appendix 10.

There’s a ton going on here. 1) “Mosey” is an allusion to the Mohs scale of hardness when classifying rocks. Diamonds are the hardest on this scale at 10. Having just talked about being soft with our words and since the poem is about diamonds who are known for being the (or one of the) hardest substance, I threw this in. I also use this to set up another concept I’ll get to in a second.

2) Jesus says if we are unforgiving and harp on the sins of others, God won’t forgive us. We will be judged. In this line I allude to a common judgment we think of in movies and from history, which is to work in a quarry or mine hewing out stone. It alludes to a labor camp.

3) Beyond depicting a labor camp signifying judgment, “hew” is also used to mean something along the lines of conformity (“hew the line”). So a failure to conform to Christ (or hew the line), which is a Christian’s goal (Rom. 8 et. al.), will bring about judgment. So here we’re referring to the idea of conformity.

4) Notions of conformity come into play, especially with diamonds, as there is a huge list of standards diamonds must conform to (without impurities) in order to be more costly. Judgment when coupled with conformity should bring in ideas of the fiery judgment we will all go through as our works are tried to separate the bad from the good works and remove the dross, hay, and stubble – leaving us more pure because we’re more conformed to God.

5) There is an irony at play here in the couplet. To better hew, we must be soft. By being soft we will be a more precious stone as far as Christ and his Kingdom are concerned. That is the opposite of what one would think, as things higher on the Mohs scale would be better tools to hew things out. But this is one of the paradoxes of Christianity (as Chesterton refers to them). By being soft, conforming to Christ, and submitting to his ways – by confessing our sins and laying them upon Christ – we avoid the judgment. As Lewis puts it, there are those who say to God “thy will be done,” and those to whom God says “thy will be done.” Our ultimate judgment rests not on God’s vindictiveness or our merit, but upon a submission to being conformed to the image of Christ and placing our trust in him.

# Ruby

Ruby reds begin to cloud my vision  
Hot emotions flood the depths of my soul  
Hateful thoughts transform mind into prison  
From reign of vengeance ne'er a caracole

Only blood can satiate my fierce thirst  
Another's oblation to the divine  
Only when gods have exacted their worst  
Will peaceful ones like me no more repine

But bloodletting's always unrelenting  
Never enough blood to cure or prevent  
As one whose life is the ultimate thing  
Can never from their self-int'rest repent

Only security that we can know's  
Willingness to give life for friends and foes

[Mt. 5:38-48]. Rubies were used as gems of protection and security.

The first stanza is meant to convey ideas often associated with the color red (hot, hateful, vengeance, reds), as the gem in view here is a Ruby. I also discuss how these emotions and thoughts are not good with the language I use (cloud, prison, and flood).

This last line summarizes the position this vengeful person is in. Vengeance reigns in their life so much that they will not take a step to the left or to the right from the path they are on. I have a number of things in mind here. 1) Simply, I'm saying that those controlled by this passion of vengeance or on an immovable path. They are controlled and won't divert their course. 2) I use the word *caracole* which is a word intended to be used specifically for horse maneuvering. In this sense, I am claiming that one who is filled with violence is no longer fully human, but beastly (as the Bible often symbolizes of inhuman humans). 3) Reign should also cause the reader to think of the alternative spelling and meaning of this word, "rein." This should especially be so since I used the word "caracole" to bring horse imagery to mind. When violence is in one's view, it tends to lead an individual by the reins. It controls them.

This oblation can be meant in two ways. In one sense, for me to require the blood or pain of another is to set myself up as divine. To say that a slight against me is worthy of another's painful infliction is to think rather highly of myself. It is setting myself up as a god. But this can also be viewed from a more Christian perspective. Many times conservatives tend to claim a view of God's law and holiness which is extremely high, then damn all those who break the law (except themselves and their group/party, of course). To sit as judges who condemn others is to not only overlook our own sin, but it overlooks God's mercy and grace towards sinners. We set ourselves up as gods when we assume a position which brings violence upon another human being on God's behalf.

These two lines reflect the notion that most people have, which is that the problem is "out there" rather than "in here" – in our own hearts. If God would just judge the world and if I could just exact justice on those people, then the world would be made right and we'd all live happily. See, I'm really a peaceful, loving person, but not while those problem people are happy. Such a view fails to recognize one's own complicity in creating a world saturated with evil.

If life is the thing held most dear, one will cling to it at all costs. This is one thing which sets Christianity apart from other worldviews. We are to consider our lives lost for the sake of our God and our neighbor (which includes enemies). MLK noted that this change in ideology was actually what catapulted him in his movement, as he was only freed to love and do justice when he laid down his defenses and submitted to the possibility of suffering for love.

The problem with holding our lives so dear is that doing so often means acting at the expense of others. Sometimes we draw blood indirectly, through our materialistic greed and our willingness to subjugate people in far away lands for our comfort and security, or to demonize migrants who seek to come into our country of plenty. Often times we are willing to draw blood more directly, through the use of force (self-defense, military, slander, etc). But we often find that no matter how much violence we do, it is never enough to provide us with enough security or vengeance. We can see this played out in the real world all the time. Hitler was created from the Allies taking vengeance on Germany. The Middle East as we know it was created out of the West's greed and violence, particularly in WWI. ISIS was created out of our violence towards Bin Laden and his followers as well as our war in Iraq. Violence rarely, if ever resolves anything. Instead, it perpetuates a cycle of violence. For a great look at this very idea, check out the movie "The Kingdom." The end is phenomenal and shows this cyclical nature of violence – even violence we perceive as justified.

Christians don't attempt to find their security in the temporal. Sure, comfort is nice and we want to live. But our ultimate hope is eternal. When we understand our hope – that it is both assured and eternal – nothing can shake us. This assurance comes in the precious, ruby red blood of our savior, shed of his own volition at the hands of the violent world we help create and perpetuate. It is through sacrifice, not violence, that we have our hope. For more on this powerful kind of love, see Appendix 11.

# \*Topaz

The greed of gold borne in the soul abounds  
A voice inside our heads which drives us mad  
Our one goal, to control, always resounds  
Pride completing endogenous dyad

Wealth makes it all too easy to be smug  
And become a bad friend like Eliphaz  
Or even worse, wealth fabricates humbug  
Making God a servant to our topaz

So heed the words of him with golden mouth  
Never allow complacency to set  
For our God is the Lord of Sabaoth  
Before whom one day all knees will be bent

Give your gifts now with generosity  
And learn wherein lies true security

[Mt. 6:1-4]. Topaz is a yellow gem which signified wealth and gold and was believed to attract gold to the wearer.

There is a double meaning here. First, borne in the soul means what it says, which is that greed is carried by the soul. There is a weight and a marring done to our soul as it carries greed. But greed is also born or formed in our souls. It isn't what's on the outside that defiles us, but that which comes from the inside. Greed is not born when we come in contact with gold, but is born on the inside of us. This greed isn't all that particular to individuals, but it abounds both in terms of who it affects (all people), and in terms of how greatly it affects each of us.

The dyad – the two part composition of every human (if you're a dualist, like most Christians are), begins as pride seeking control. In our arrogance we set ourselves up as gods and believe we are the center of the universe. We ourselves are worth preserving and elevating. In order to accomplish our ascension to divinity, we must have control. We must control not only the environment around us (for both pleasure and security), but also individuals. This dyad is endogenous, or created internally (just as was referenced a few lines earlier where evil comes out of us, it doesn't go into us) and is common to all humanity. There is also a double meaning intended here, as "dyad" should trigger the thought of the very close word "dryad." Dryads were the living beings who inhabited trees in Greek mythology. While often considered beautiful and wonderful, encounters with them could also be very dangerous, leaving one mad, dumb, etc. Here, endogenous dyad (or dryad) signifies that this pride and control are the true spirit residing within our corporeal body – a spirit which when encountered and fed can perpetuate and exacerbate our maddened state.

Eliphaz was one of Job's friends. He came from a land known for its wisdom. Many interpretations of the name "Eliphaz" show it as meaning "El (or god, as in 'elohim) is fine gold." This name adds to the gold theme, but so does Eliphaz's actions. Eliphaz promoted what we would call a prosperity gospel today. He, a wealthy and wise man, sat smugly in his perceived wealth. He thought his wealth and security were tied to his morality. He was untouchable by God because he was a good man. Conversely, the judgment which befell Job must have been because Job was morally compromised. In this way, Eliphaz was blind to his own sinfulness before God, but also blind to the great insecurity in his life despite his current wellbeing. His trust was not in God but in his own perceived morality and wealth.

Wealth constructs a deceitful story (humbug). I use "fabricate" here in a triple sense, as fabricate can mean to "construct" or can also mean "lie/deceive." It's a double emphasis on wealth's ability to deceive us and misguide us. It is also a literary reference to the infamous Scrooge whose most famous word was "humbug." In this sense, wealth has a tendency to harden our hearts like scrooge. That's because the greatest deception of wealth is that God is not the giver of wealth, but that God is subservient to it. By bowing our knees to wealth as our security, we are telling God that these things are better and safer than he is. We elevate pleasure and security while denigrating God.

"Lord of Sabaoth" occurs twice in the New Testament of which I'm aware (Rom. 9:29 and James 5:4), at least in the King James Version it goes untranslated. The word means "armies."

The man with a golden mouth refers to John Chrysostom, whose name meant "golden mouthed." He was supposedly an unparalleled orator. I use him here because his name is yet one more reference to gold in this poem. I also use Chrysostom because in his book "On Wealth and Poverty," he addresses wealth and greed. Of it, he says, "In this way luxury often leads to forgetfulness. As for you, my beloved, if you sit at table, remember that from the table you must go to prayer. Fill your belly so moderately that you may not become too heavy to bend your knees and call upon your God." So in this stanza, I allude to Chrysostom's quote here, reminding individuals that we must never be complacent, we must remember our God, and that our God is the ultimate judge before whom all knees will bow. If we are too caught up in our wealth now and running after it rather than bowing the knee before our God now, we will one day end up bowing the knee before him anyway, though it will be under different circumstances – judgment vs. service.

Matthew 5 tells us to be perfect like God is perfect, then goes on to describe generosity as a part of how such a feat is to be accomplished. By giving our money away without consideration of another's praise or without consideration of the practicality of the act, we learn to trust God both for our means and for the outcome of our gifts. As we learn to be generous, our faith in God grows and our dependence on wealth diminishes. Ironically, it is in this giving away of our wealth and placing of our trust in God that our security grows.

# \*Sapphire

Blue collared workers work to pay the bills  
White collared workers work so they're not blue  
The first, harbor of all our social ills  
Second, enforcers of what is taboo

Day will arrive when our Lord comes again  
Redeeming blues through Saturnalia  
No more wanting, no more a social plan  
All clothed with same Sapphired regalia

Time is as fleeting as the passions are  
While future's as sure as where our hope lies  
In present, then, we each must work so hard  
Ensuring passions don't our hope belie

Until day our bridegroom comes to redeem  
We mortify our sin, fasting unseen

I know it's a generality that blue collared workers make less than white collared workers, and that they work to scrape by. I know because I was a "professional teacher," and I made less than a number of other lucrative professions like welders, mechanics, etc. I am not at all making a value difference, but a general observation. Blue collared workers tend to be looked down upon because they are generally working to pay rent, food, electricity, etc. Often times the less well-off live more day to day. On the flip side, the white collared workers work to survive as well, but in a different way. The white collared workers who are able to look beyond today recognize that life is vain. As such, they work and work in order to obtain more money, and through money, more things. They work to keep the blues away. This both means that they work to maintain their status and not become blue collared, but even more so, it means they work in order not to become depressed and suicidal. But this materialism is just a vain pursuit meant to numb the pain.

Again, my slight on the blue collared isn't my own position, but from the perspective of the elite. The elite believe that the poor and lower class are where social ills are born and raised. We see this by aversions to immigrants, aversions to the poor, aversions to those in particularly lower-class occupations (e.g. fast food), etc. But ironically, it is the white collared, or upper class who gets to define what taboo means. Obviously their definition is self-serving and perpetuates subjugation of others while perpetuating their own status. We can see this in how white collared crimes and individuals are prosecuted, the length of punishment, etc. We can also readily see that the white collared are no more socially graced, as they are frequently involved in great evils. The white collards are constantly trying to assert power, grab money, and subjugate others, defining what is good and evil, taboo and acceptable.

Saturnalia was a festival celebrating the god Saturn. It was a time of great feasting and celebration. In this sense, the merrymaking rids us of the blues, as in sadness. However, Saturnalia was also a time when social classes and distinctions disappeared. As one common example, the masters would serve the slaves dinner first, and slaves could speak freely and critically to their masters. They could also dress like freed people. I use Saturnalia both because I think it is a beautiful depiction of what Christ actually does permanently for those in the Kingdom now, and what he will make permanently for all when he returns, both in terms of our equality and in terms of our partying, banqueting, and feasting. I also use Saturnalia because Saturn is one of the main gods associated with blue sapphire.

There will be no more wanting both in the sense of needs, but also in the sense of envious wanting, like that found in materialism. We will have all provisions and will share freely, having no need of evil desires or creating social plans to provide for those who are not being provided for.

Passions, like time, disappear. They either disappear because they are fickle and changing, because we temporarily satiate them until they return, or because we die and have them no more. Hope – at least the hope of the Christian, however, is a permanent hope grounded in the immutable. If our hope is in the Almighty, immutable One, then our future is unwavering, as is the hope we can have today.

As Christians, we have competing desires. We desire to live in accordance with our hope, but we also continue to have our fleshly desires and lack of faith. Our job is to live in accordance with our hope and not give into vain and fleshly desires. This doesn't mean we abhor pleasure, but we hold it in perspective of the eternal and the meaningful.

If we are to have hope and subdue fleshly desires, we must then mortify sin in our flesh. This mortification is an allusion to John Owen's book, "The Mortification of Sin," a wonderful read about how and why believers (or followers, as I've begun to call them) should be putting sin to death in their flesh. In Matthew, one of the ways we see Jesus telling us to be perfect like God is by fasting. This fasting is not intended to be seen by others, or that would be self-serving. It's not meant as something which appeases God in and of itself. This fasting is an action which teaches us that 1) we are dependent on God (e.g. Jesus in the desert and "man cannot live by bread alone), and

2) that our desires can be lessened and controlled. By weakening the power desire has over us – even good desires like eating – we help discipline ourselves to choose against fleshly desires. We also learn to depend on God and we are able to use the time we save on preparing and eating meals to pray and focus on God. Every twinge we feel in our stomachs reminds us of our provider and our hope. While Jesus doesn't say or imply the following, I also think that in light of all those in the world who are suffering without food, that we join them in solidarity as we choose not to indulge – or more likely in our Western lives, overindulge. Choosing to forego food helps us to live lives focused

on others. As many early saints who fasted remind us, it doesn't merely allow us to live in solidarity intangibly, but also tangibly. As we forego a few meals, the money or food not used on ourselves can be used for others. Fasting, then, should not be some empty ritual. It should focus us on God, mortify sin in our flesh, remind us of our dependence and hope, help us live in solidarity with our fellow humans, and allow us to tangibly help those in need. Fasting is a practice which gives us a foretaste of its opposite – the feast where all are united and equal. It helps us to reflect on this truth of equality and worship now, and hope for its future assurance for the world. See Appendix 12 for a deeper discussion on desires.



# Garnet

Can eyes foresee what tattered lives bespeak?  
Can flesh give some of itself unto life?  
Or is our mind illumined by what's bleak  
And beings marred and with corruption rife?

We see Noah light his path with Garnet  
A decent man with his family saved  
Yet what came out of the maritime pit  
Was same broken humanity depraved

As in Adam all we, like Noah, die  
So like him through one man we'll all be saved  
One who embarked on Messianic Arc  
Defeated death with life inside the grave

The one came from heaven and treasured Earth  
That those of Earth could seek the kingdom first

Can people see what the lives of the poor and downtrodden evidence? Also, can our eyes foresee what the lives of the poor prophecy about us and our culture if they remain unnoticed and not helped?

Can we, through our flesh save another? If we're all starving and I give of my flesh to be eaten, am I really sustaining a life? Jesus asked a similar question and repulsed quite a lot of people. To eat our flesh and to drink our blood is not life, but death.

Unfortunately, we are blind to the poor and downtrodden and our flesh is mortal. We do not have life on the inside. We are the walking dead.

One of the only things I was able to find about garnet is that tradition holds it is a stone Noah used to illuminate the ark while on the water.

Noah and his family went into a boat for salvation, but came out a still depraved group of people. It didn't take long for them to exhibit that depravity and create a terrible world. This is why I use the word "pit," as it not only indicates a literal pit, but it is a word often used as a name for hell. Evil was in Noah and continued after the flood. What came out of the ark was evil.

This is a clear reference to Romans. Through Adam and through Christ we inherit curses and blessings.

"Arc" here has two meanings, one talking about the arc or path of Christ's life, and the other is a reference back to Noah's ark. Here we see that Jesus, unlike Noah, exited the pit not depraved, but perfect. He defeated death with his life and exited glorified. It is through this salvation that we have true salvation and hope. Here garnet is also significant because garnet did have some early connections to Christ's blood because of its deep red color. So like Noah illuminated the ark with garnet, Christ illuminated the tomb with his blood as it provided life and resurrection, and now provides the same for us.

With this great salvation we have we have through Christ we should seek the Kingdom first.

# \*Jade

In life the only certainty we get  
Is that death for each of us is assured  
We, like the gods, ensure through jade rabbit  
Our destiny's sufficiently insured

But pestle and mortar cannot concoct  
A cure for pestilence which mortifies  
Impending doom, our sacred lives, defrocks  
And minds, in time, to lunacy it drives

What can we prize in life's vap'rous glory?  
Truth - a lowly and humble parapet  
Our choice, to bay as beasts in furore  
Or put truth into our pipes and smoke it

Worry not for tomorrow is its own  
And emperor is seated on his throne

[Mt. 6:25-34]. While jade can have a number of colors, green is the most well known (along with white). Especially in Asia (particularly China), jade was thought of as scholarly and imperial. It could supposedly increase the longevity of your life and heal.

The “Jade Rabbit” (or hare) is a shape ancients in the East saw in the moon. If you look it up, you can find the shape of a rabbit who appears to be grinding up substances with a mortar and pestle. This rabbit supposedly mixed the elixir of life for the gods. I reference it here because of the reference to “jade,” but also because jade has an association with nobility and status – which the gods certainly had. We set ourselves up as gods as we seek to immortality the same. The last line with “Destiny” also makes this stanza a nerd reference, as the “jade rabbit” is an exotic weapon in the Destiny franchise of video games.

There is a wordplay going on here, as the “pestle” and “mortar” the jade rabbit uses has as its roots “pest” and “mort.” We see these roots come back in “pestilence” and “mortifies.” This isn’t a mere repetition of root words, but rather a juxtaposition of ideas. Whereas the rabbit uses his “pest” and “mort” to perpetuate life, we see that “pest” and “mort” are the ultimate takers of life. This doesn’t mean that it is the rabbit in the moon that kills us, but rather that placing our hope in such things is the opposite of true life. There are also a lot of things going on just with the word “mortifies” here, as there are a number of definitions coming into play here. In short, it means that it brings about fear (I’m mortified), it brings about decay, and it is death (mortem in Latin is death) to us mortals.

The knowledge of our demise, in time, disrobes our vain and lofty beliefs about ourselves. No matter how great someone is in life, they are made equal in death. We stand naked in front of the world with this truth, and it hurts. To dwell on this truth and acknowledge it, in time, can drive us mad. “Lunacy” here is yet another tie-in to the moon which was introduced as our jade rabbit’s home.

This is nearly a direct quote from an ancient Chinese poem called “The Old Dust” by Li Bai (or Li Po, or Li Bo). The line referenced is the final line of the poem: “What is there to prize in the life’s vaporous glory?” I only changed it to fit the iambic pentameter of the sonnet format. Bai’s poem is largely about how short our lives are and how the finitude of our lives seems to make them purposeless.

So what can we prize in life if everything about our lives is fleeting? Well, it seems the one thing that is not fleeting is truth. What is true now is always true. If it is 10:12 right now, while it won’t always be 10:12, it will always be true that it was 10:12 at the point at which I said it was 10:12. Truth is immutable, though truths about mutable things change as those things grow, age, learn, etc. I could truthfully say that I will be 33 tomorrow, and I could say that each day for about another month. But one day, I must stop saying that because it will no longer be true. The truthfulness of my statements haven’t changed, but my position changes the need for me to recognize a new truth which corresponds to my situation. But as I discussed in line 8, the acceptance of truth, particularly the truth that death is inevitable (and according to Bai, the vanity which comes from this truth), drives us to lunacy. That’s why here I refer to truth as being a low “parapet.” In my mind I’m imagining our lives as like traversing a high, narrow bridge. If truth is our guiding purpose, it’s an awfully low parapet to protect us from either falling over or choosing to jump over the edge. Hedonists and suicidal nihilists aren’t anywhere different on the spectrum of their understanding of truth, they simply differ as to how they live in light of that truth. Truth in and of itself isn’t helpful. Alvin Plangina’s evolutionary argument against naturalism raises this same problem as he shows how truth is irrelevant for (and it can also be logically followed that it is sometimes even harmful to) survival.

There are three meanings in here. First, to “bay” should once again bring ideas of the moon back into play, as wolves bay at the moon. Second, English readers commonly read “Bai” (as in Li Bai) as BAY, though I believe it’s actually pronounced BY E. So this is a reference back to Li Bai. Finally, I unpack the first option we have living in meaninglessness. First, we can become like beasts and throw off rationality. We can choose to believe that love, free will, and purpose exist in a physical world though we know they can’t. We can absolutely ignore the implications of the truth and suppress it. See Appendix 13 for discussions on truth and love on a naturalistic system.

There is a ton going on in this line. 1) This line references two other options we have to deal with purposelessness of a finite life. One is that we can turn to drugs (represented in the pipe), which is simply a reference for turning to pleasure and substances to numb or ignore the truth. Rather than act like irrational beasts who don’t seem to know the truth, these individuals know the truth but defy it. The cease the day and try to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

2) The second meaning is the idiomatic meaning here of “you can put it in your pipe and smoke it.” That simply means that you can deal with it, whether you like it or not.

3) Jade was particularly thought to add longevity to life if smoked through jade pipes. This reference to putting it (truth implied) in your pipe and smoking it is that the acceptance of truth will actually add longevity to your life. Since I believe the truth is the Christian truth, I don’t think it is a low parapet. I think it is our sustaining hope. I answer how this is the case in the final couplet.

The ultimate truth above all truths is that God is on his throne and reigns in power. This life is a vapor, as James and Bai say, but Christians also know that there is resurrection. The truth that God is in control, that God is love, and that God provides in that he will ultimately preserve us, then we don’t have to look to the past or the future, like Bai, and be depressed. The truth gives us hope, and hope allows us to live today in security. In this sense, we are the most free. Whereas the hedonist is controlled by her fate, being forced to cram as much pleasure into their lives, we Christians are not controlled by our future. We are freed by it to live today as today, and not shackled to tomorrow.

# \*Pearl

To those who know not life our death is vain  
Moonshine muscled into our very souls  
But they can't see truth of what they disdain  
These pearls in mud in which the pig wallows

Ungulates can't know supernatural  
Nor can minds fathom the depths of the sea  
Unless God overcomes the rational  
Changing dumb asses to talking donkeys

To all those who have wisdom let them hear  
Before us there stands a pearl of great price  
Two choices lay ahead, the first is fear  
Second, sell all you have for Paradise

Kingdoms of Earth and Gates of hell will fail  
While pearly Gates of conquered will prevail

This refers to the foolishness of the Christian life. To the world, the Christian's sacrifice and way is foolish. In the first line I say "our death is" rather than "our deaths are" to emphasize the unity and oneness of the Christian life and aim. However, in the next line I will separate this to emphasize that we are still individuals (souls).

Moonshine here can mean three things. 1) They think we're drunk and intoxicated on religion, like those on the day of Pentacost believed about the Christians. 2) They think our religion is "moonshine," or craziness. We are ignorant fools. 3) What we are selling is crazy. We're liars. We're snake oil salesmen. This is somewhat like setting up Lewis's "Lord, Liar, Lunatic" example, though without the Lord part. The world believes that this stupidity we believe has muscled its way into our lives – either by force or by massage, by necessity or by brainwashing over time. This idea of "muscle" is also a word play on "mussel," which are the freshwater variant of the bivalve which forms pearls. In this sense I am alluding to the idea that the pears created in us are pearls from streams of living water (fresh, running water) – a significant image in the New Testament and early church for the life of Christ in us.

This is an obvious allusion to where Matthew talks about throwing our pearls before swine. The pearls of a Christian's life and wisdom mean nothing to a lost world. Our pearls are muddied by the world, and the beasts cannot recognize their splendor and worth. This use of swine may also have a deeper meaning in Matthew, and it certainly does as I use it. Pigs are one of the few (maybe only, I'm not sure) animals which appear clean on the outside (cloven hooved) but are not clean on the inside (don't chew their cud). Without a close inspection of swine, nobody would ever know they were unclean by their appearance. Often times it is the same way with the wise/fool, believer/unbeliever, etc.

I carry on with the theme of beasts and pigs in two ways. First, I refer to "ungulates," which are just hoofed animals. Second, I use the word "supernatural." In the middle of this word we find the Latin "perna," which is the word from which "pearl" gets its name. "Perna" means "leg" in Latin, and pearls come from this word because the creatures which form pearls were seen as being in the shape of a leg (a pig or sheep leg). This line, then, emphasizes the beast and pig reference.

The beasts can't understand the depths of the sea where pearls come from, so how could they understand the supernatural pearls? Here I use "fathom" as a double reference, both to mean "comprehend" as well as to emphasize the depths of the sea, as "fathom" is a unit of large measurement in the ocean depths.

But if God couldn't give beasts understanding, who then could be saved? We know that God can work in beasts, for we've seen it done. He made Balaam's donkey speak, and he made Nebuchadnezzar dumb like an animal, and then normal again. God can give understanding and blindness. If he can give animals understanding, certainly he can bring about humility and understanding in dumb asses. I of course mean "dumb asses" here in the technical sense of non-verbal donkeys and by no means am stooping to vulgarity – not even in a double entendric way 😊

"Pearl of great price" is a name Jesus gives to the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13.

When we come across a pearl of great price, we have two options. The first is to ignore or pass up the opportunity due to a fear of the gravity of the choice before you. It is indeed a risk to sell everything. But the reward is great. If we pursue the pearl, we receive paradise.

Jesus says that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church. Gates are not offensive, and Jesus means for this to imply that from his resurrection on, the church will be the assailing the gates of hell as Christ's enemies are made his footstool. Nothing can withstand the onslaught of the church. This onslaught is meant not to be against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of darkness – the gates of hell.

This is a pearly gates reference, a common depiction of heaven which comes from Revelation. I am also depicting the notion of the upside down kingdom here. I say that the conquered will prevail, which seems counterintuitive. But it is those conquered by Christ who will prevail against the world. Second, I say that the gates will prevail, which is counterintuitive. If you read the book of Revelation, you'll get all of this counterintuitive sort of thing. Conquering and prevailing in Revelation does not look like spilling another's blood and violently defeating them. In fact, of the 18 times the word "blood" appears in the book of Revelation, 10 (and possibly 11) of those times the blood is that of the martyrs or of Christ. The other 7-8 times it is referenced metaphorically in relation to judgment (e.g. the moon turns to blood). Revelation is all about heaven conquering not by warring, but by standing firm in love and

conquering by the laying down of our lives. We can stand behind the pearly gates of heaven because Christ has already conquered. As it has been said, we don't fight for victory, we fight from victory. This is the wisdom of God, exemplified by The Wisdom of God. Take these pearls of wisdom to heart.



## Appendix 1: Chesterton on the Paradox of Christianity

<http://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/orthodoxy-6-the-paradoxes-of-christianity>

Chesterton begins chapter six by explaining that the biggest problem with the world is that it is nearly reasonable, “but not quite.” It is reasonable up to a point, but then it changes. He gives the analogy of an alien observer of human kind. The alien sees that humanity is symmetrical. Two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, two arms, two legs, five fingers on each side, etc. But when the alien would leave what is observed to make a hypothesis of what is inside humans, were he to say that humans had two hearts – or one symmetrical heart symmetrically placed, the alien observer would be very reasonable. In fact, if the alien guessed that humans had one heart, it would be absurd given his evidence. But it is exactly at this juncture of reason and reality that the alien would go wrong, for humans only have one heart. This, Chesterton says, is exactly what we get with Christianity. We get subtle predictions that seem to go wrong, but are exactly right. For “whenever we feel there is something odd in Christian theology, we shall generally find that there is something odd in the truth.”

Ironically, it was the atheist and agnostic that lead Chesterton towards the consideration of Christianity. The more Chesterton read, the more he realized that the agnostics were painting an inconsistent picture of Christianity – or at least a very eccentric one. This piqued his interest. He says,

“This odd effect of the great agnostics in arousing doubts deeper than their own might be illustrated in many ways. I take only one. As I read and re-read all the non-Christian or anti-Christian accounts of the faith, from Huxley to Bradlaugh, a slow and awful impression grew gradually but graphically upon my mind— the impression that Christianity must be a most extraordinary thing. For not only (as I understood) had Christianity the most flaming vices, but it had apparently a mystical talent for combining vices which seemed inconsistent with each other. It was attacked on all sides and for all contradictory reasons. No sooner had one rationalist demonstrated that it was too far to the east than another demonstrated with equal clearness that it was much too far to the west. No sooner had my indignation died down at its angular and aggressive squareness than I was called up again to notice and condemn its enervating and sensual roundness.”

To prove his point, Chesterton elaborates with a number of examples.

### 1. Christians push away pleasure and joy but Christians have pure joy.

“One rationalist had hardly done calling Christianity a nightmare before another began to call it a fool’s paradise. This puzzled me; the charges seemed inconsistent. Christianity could not at once be the black mask on a white world, and also the white mask on a black world. The state of the Christian could not be at once so comfortable that he was a coward to cling to it, and so

uncomfortable that he was a fool to stand it.”

## **2. Christians are too meek, passive, and unmanly, but Christians are too warlike and violent:**

“The Gospel paradox about the other cheek, the fact that priests never fought, a hundred things made plausible the accusation that Christianity was an attempt to make a man too like a sheep. I read it and believed it, and if I had read nothing different, I should have gone on believing it. But I read something very different. I turned the next page in my agnostic manual, and my brain turned up-side down. Now I found that I was to hate Christianity not for fighting too little, but for fighting too much. Christianity, it seemed, was the mother of wars. Christianity had deluged the world with blood. I had got thoroughly angry with the Christian, because he never was angry. And now I was told to be angry with him because his anger had been the most huge and horrible thing in human history; because his anger had soaked the earth and smoked to the sun. The very people who reproached Christianity with the meekness and non-resistance of the monasteries were the very people who reproached it also with the violence and valour of the Crusades. It was the fault of poor old Christianity (somehow or other) both that Edward the Confessor did not fight and that Richard Coeur de Lion did. The Quakers (we were told) were the only characteristic Christians; and yet the massacres of Cromwell and Alva were characteristic Christian crimes. What could it all mean? What was this Christianity which always forbade war and always produced wars? What could be the nature of the thing which one could abuse first because it would not fight, and second because it was always fighting? In what world of riddles was born this monstrous murder and this monstrous meekness? The shape of Christianity grew a queerer shape every instant.”

## **3. Christianity is the same as all other religions, yet Christianity is so different from other religions:**

“But then I found an astonishing thing. I found that the very people who said that mankind was one church from Plato to Emerson were the very people who said that morality had changed altogether, and that what was right in one age was wrong in another. If I asked, say, for an altar, I was told that we needed none, for men our brothers gave us clear oracles and one creed in their universal customs and ideals. But if I mildly pointed out that one of men’s universal customs was to have an altar, then my agnostic teachers turned clean round and told me that men had always been in darkness and the superstitions of savages. I found it was their daily taunt against Christianity that it was the light of one people and had left all others to die in the dark. But I also found that it was their special boast for themselves that science and progress were the discovery of one people, and that all other peoples had died in the dark. Their chief insult to Christianity was actually their chief compliment to themselves, and there seemed to be a strange unfairness about all their relative insistence on the two things. When considering some pagan or agnostic, we were to remember that all men had one religion; when considering some mystic or spiritualist, we were only to consider what absurd religions some men had. We could trust the ethics of Epictetus, because ethics had never changed. We must not trust the ethics of Bossuet, because ethics had changed. They changed in two hundred years, but not in two thousand.”

4. Christianity forces marriage and family upon women forbidding them freedom in loneliness and contemplation, yet Christianity “dragged women to the loneliness and contemplation of the cloister.”

5. Christianity is against women and their intellect, yet the modern’s sneer at the church was that “only women” attended it.

6. Christianity is too ornate and ritualistic, yet Christianity is too plain and downcast.

7. Christianity was accused of restraining sexuality, yet Malthusians recognized that it restrained it too little, for Christians had high birth rates and contributed to "overpopulation."

8. There is too much disunion in Christianity, yet Christianity is too unified.

Taking all of this evidence in, Chesterton comments,

“It must be understood that I did not conclude hastily that the accusations were false or the accusers fools. I simply deduced that Christianity must be something even weirder and wickeder than they made out. A thing might have these two opposite vices; but it must be a rather queer thing if it did. A man might be too fat in one place and too thin in another; but he would be an odd shape. At this point my thoughts were only of the odd shape of the Christian religion; I did not allege any odd shape in the rationalistic mind...[But] this began to be alarming. It looked not so much as if Christianity was bad enough to include any vices, but rather as if any stick was good enough to beat Christianity with. What again could this astonishing thing be like which people were so anxious to contradict, that in doing so they did not mind contradicting themselves?...

I wished to be quite fair then, and I wish to be quite fair now; and I did not conclude that the attack on Christianity was all wrong. I only concluded that if Christianity was wrong, it was very wrong indeed. Such hostile horrors might be combined in one thing, but that thing must be very strange and solitary. There are men who are misers, and also spendthrifts; but they are rare. There are men sensual and also ascetic; but they are rare. But if this mass of mad contradictions really existed, quakerish and bloodthirsty, too gorgeous and too thread-bare, austere, yet pandering preposterously to the lust of the eye, the enemy of women and their foolish refuge, a solemn pessimist and a silly optimist, if this evil existed, then there was in this evil something quite supreme and unique. For I found in my rationalist teachers no explanation of such exceptional corruption. Christianity (theoretically speaking) was in their eyes only one of the ordinary myths and errors of mortals. They gave me no key to this twisted and unnatural badness. Such a paradox of evil rose to the stature of the supernatural. It was, indeed, almost as supernatural as the infallibility of the Pope. An historic institution, which never went right, is really quite as much of a miracle as an institution that cannot go wrong. The only explanation

which immediately occurred to my mind was that Christianity did not come from heaven, but from hell. Really, if Jesus of Nazareth was not Christ, He must have been Antichrist.”

So Chesterton did not immediately take all of these contradicting accusations as proving Christianity. Rather, he concluded that Christianity must be some absolutely abnormal thing – to harbor such extreme ideas. But then Chesterton had a revelation. What if it was not Christianity that was oddly shaped, but everything else?

“And then in a quiet hour a strange thought struck me like a still thunderbolt. There had suddenly come into my mind another explanation. Suppose we heard an unknown man spoken of by many men. Suppose we were puzzled to hear that some men said he was too tall and some too short; some objected to his fatness, some lamented his leanness; some thought him too dark, and some too fair. One explanation (as has been already admitted) would be that he might be an odd shape. But there is another explanation. He might be the right shape. Outrageously tall men might feel him to be short. Very short men might feel him to be tall. Old bucks who are growing stout might consider him insufficiently filled out; old beaux who were growing thin might feel that he expanded beyond the narrow lines of elegance. Perhaps Swedes (who have pale hair like tow) called him a dark man, while negroes considered him distinctly blonde. Perhaps (in short) this extraordinary thing is really the ordinary thing; at least the normal thing, the centre. Perhaps, after all, it is Christianity that is sane and all its critics that are mad— in various ways. I tested this idea by asking myself whether there was about any of the accusers anything morbid that might explain the accusation. I was startled to find that this key fitted a lock...

It was no longer a complication of diseases in Christianity, but a complication of diseases in [atheists and agnostics]. The restraints of Christians saddened [them] simply because [they were] more hedonist than a healthy man should be. The faith of Christians angered [them] because [they were] more pessimist than a healthy man should be. In the same way the Malthusians by instinct attacked Christianity; not because there is anything especially anti-Malthusian about Christianity, but because there is something a little anti-human about Malthusianism.”

But Chesterton recognizes that the atheists and agnostics did not err out of pure malice. There was indeed something startlingly unique about Christianity. The crusaders were extremely fierce, and the monks extremely meek. It was at this moment that Chesterton’s earlier thought about the martyr and the suicide struck him. Christianity had resonated with this intuition within Chesterton, so perhaps Christianity had something right about these other opposing notions. In fact, Christianity’s embrace of opposites seemed to be central to its core theology.

“Madly as Christians might love the martyr or hate the suicide, they never felt these passions more madly than I had felt them long before I dreamed of Christianity... We want not an amalgam or compromise, but both things at the top of their energy; love and wrath both burning. Here I shall only trace it in relation to ethics. But I need not remind the reader that the idea of this combination is indeed central in orthodox theology. For orthodox theology has specially

insisted that Christ was not a being apart from God and man, like an elf, nor yet a being half human and half not, like a centaur, but both things at once and both things thoroughly, very man and very God.”

It is here that Chesterton hits on the nerve of Christianity. This is the truth that tipped the scales in Christianity’s favor. For whereas all other religions and beliefs had held the idea that virtues were lived in balance, Christianity held that virtues were lived in extremes. For a balance is really just a weakening dilution of both virtues, whereas allowing virtues to exist in their purest form maintains their identity and power. As the alien observer who would guess that a man had one heart rather than two, this is exactly the point of irrationality that Christianity predicted correctly. To show how Christianity gets this concept right, Chesterton proceeds by using the example of courage.

Chesterton says that courage is a contradiction in terms. It means “a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die.” This is “not a piece of mysticism for saints and heroes. It is a piece of everyday advice for sailors or mountaineers. A man cut off by the sea may save his life if he will risk it on the precipice.” Chesterton continues with more examples.

“A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine. No philosopher, I fancy, has ever expressed this romantic riddle with adequate lucidity, and I certainly have not done so. But Christianity has done more: it has marked the limits of it in the awful graves of the suicide and the hero, showing the distance between him who dies for the sake of living and him who dies for the sake of dying. And it has held up ever since above the European lances the banner of the mystery of chivalry: the Christian courage, which is a disdain of death; not the Chinese courage, which is a disdain of life.”

Chesterton continues on by exploring how pride and humility are also extremes that are exaggerated within Christianity.

“And now I began to find that this duplex passion was the Christian key to ethics everywhere. Everywhere the creed made a moderation out of the still crash of two impetuous emotions. Take, for instance, the matter of modesty, of the balance between mere pride and mere prostration. The average pagan, like the average agnostic, would merely say that he was content with himself, but not insolently self-satisfied, that there were many better and many worse, that his desserts were limited, but he would see that he got them. In short, he would walk with his head in the air; but not necessarily with his nose in the air... Being a mixture of two things, it is a dilution of two things; neither is present in its full strength or contributes its full colour. This proper pride does

not lift the heart like the tongue of trumpets; you cannot go clad in crimson and gold for this. On the other hand, this mild rationalist modesty does not cleanse the soul with fire and make it clear like crystal; it does not (like a strict and searching humility) make a man as a little child, who can sit at the feet of the grass. It does not make him look up and see marvels; for Alice must grow small if she is to be Alice in Wonderland. Thus it loses both the poetry of being proud and the poetry of being humble. Christianity sought by this same strange expedient to save both of them.

It separated the two ideas and then exaggerated them both. In one way Man was to be haughtier than he had ever been before; in another way he was to be humbler than he had ever been before. In so far as I am Man I am the chief of creatures. In so far as I am a man I am the chief of sinners. All humility that had meant pessimism, that had meant man taking a vague or mean view of his whole destiny— all that was to go. We were to hear no more the wail of Ecclesiastes that humanity had no pre-eminence over the brute, or the awful cry of Homer that man was only the saddest of all the beasts of the field. Man was a statue of God walking about the garden. Man had pre-eminence over all the brutes; man was only sad because he was not a beast, but a broken god. The Greek had spoken of men creeping on the earth, as if clinging to it. Now Man was to tread on the earth as if to subdue it. Christianity thus held a thought of the dignity of man that could only be expressed in crowns rayed like the sun and fans of peacock plumage. Yet at the same time it could hold a thought about the abject smallness of man that could only be expressed in fasting and fantastic submission, in the grey ashes of St. Dominic and the white snows of St. Bernard. When one came to think of one's self, there was vista and void enough for any amount of bleak abnegation and bitter truth. There the realistic gentleman could let himself go— as long as he let himself go at himself. There was an open playground for the happy pessimist. Let him say anything against himself short of blaspheming the original aim of his being; let him call himself a fool and even a damned fool (though that is Calvinistic); but he must not say that fools are not worth saving. He must not say that a man, quâ man, can be valueless. Here again, in short, Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious.

**Chesterton finishes his string of examples with the virtue of charity.**

“Take another case: the complicated question of charity, which some highly uncharitable idealists seem to think quite easy. Charity is a paradox, like modesty and courage. Stated baldly, charity certainly means one of two things— pardoning unpardonable acts, or loving unlovable people. But if we ask ourselves (as we did in the case of pride) what a sensible pagan would feel about such a subject, we shall probably be beginning at the bottom of it. A sensible pagan would say that there were some people one could forgive, and some one couldn't: a slave who stole wine could be laughed at; a slave who betrayed his benefactor could be killed, and cursed even after he was killed. In so far as the act was pardonable, the man was pardonable. That again is rational, and even refreshing; but it is a dilution. It leaves no place for a pure horror of injustice, such as that which is a great beauty in the innocent. And it leaves no place for a mere tenderness for men as men, such as is the whole fascination of the charitable. Christianity came in here as before. It came in startlingly with a sword, and clove one thing from another. It divided the crime from the criminal. The criminal we must forgive unto seventy times seven. The crime we must not forgive at all. It was not enough that slaves who stole wine inspired partly anger and partly kindness. We must be much more angry with theft than before, and yet much kinder to thieves

than before. There was room for wrath and love to run wild. And the more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild.”

After all of this, Chesterton wraps up the concept with a wonderful biblical analogy. “...When the lion lies down with the lamb the lion becomes lamb-like. But that is brutal annexation and imperialism on the part of the lamb. That is simply the lamb absorbing the lion instead of the lion eating the lamb. The real problem is— Can the lion lie down with the lamb and still retain his royal ferocity? That is the problem the Church attempted; that is the miracle she achieved.” How does one maintain a hatred for injustice yet compassion and mercy towards criminals? How can one uphold absolute human value yet be meek and humble? No other religion or worldview has answered these riddles the way that Christianity has. No other religion allows pride and humility or mercy and justice to be as pronounced and full as Christianity. All other religions have predicted exactly what the rational prediction is – that there must be a balance. But as Chesterton points out, this is a dilution. Christianity maintains the extremes, and it maintains them fiercely.

Chesterton finishes the chapter by giving a very brief overview of church history. He explains how the church has avoided the countless heresies and pagan pitfalls that would have made Christianity just another religion that fell along the wayside. This is what makes Christianity’s doctrine so important. Any deviance in doctrine can easily turn into great blasphemy and ruin the whole ideal, influencing greatly the happiness and carelessness of humanity. It is the church’s avoidance of the multitude of pitfalls, their protection of the core doctrine, and the embracing of the extremes that have lead Chesterton to see Christianity’s validity and uniqueness.

Chesterton has now set up chapter seven, which will delve into how the Christian ideal should guide our lives, and why this ideal surpasses any other ideal that exists.

## Appendix 2.1: Purpose

<http://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/i-did-it-my-way-rebellion-against-purpose>

Today, the notion of purpose grounded outside of oneself seems to be disappearing. Proclamations of “do whatever you want as long as it feels good to you,” “just believe in yourself,” and “whatever makes you happy,” abound. Purpose is no longer something one finds, but has become something one makes. But for as ignorant and superstitious as past cultures seem to our modern intellect, they understood much better than moderns that our purpose needs a grounding outside ourselves. In fact, it seems that we moderns, the ones who are embracing materialism in larger numbers, are the ones who are the fools. The notion that religion throws in an extra layer of complexity is an easy conclusion to make. But our predecessors recognized Occam's Razor before Occam did, and understood that the winner in a logical duel is not the one with the simplest answer, but rather the simplest adequate one. In this recognition, they understood that losing deity would mean losing explanation. To accept the answer of materialism was to accept a simple solution, but an inadequate one.

While the systems that were built to explain the external grounding in the past may seem very foolish to us today with their complex ideas, our society is more foolish in a number of ways since we defy philosophical grounding and logic altogether. While a Hebrew monotheist may have been fearfully superstitious, his fear that God would strike him dead made sense if that god existed. On materialism, while actions of nature may be explained through cause and effect without a direct link to God, philosophies of life as we intuitively know them end up being incoherent without a creator (e.g. free will, love, purpose, etc). Materialists laugh at ancients for believing in a god, but the ancients can laugh at the materialist for believing anything at all. The ancients may have been wrong, but they could live consistently. The materialists may be right, but find that in so being, they cannot live. For the sake of this discussion, I will be focusing on the incoherence of purpose on materialism.

As humans who have all obviously come into existence at some point, we only have one possible route for finding our purpose. If we entered existence via creation, we are created beings who can find our purpose in fulfilling that for which we were created. Just as an ax is endowed with purpose by its creator and wielder, so it is with created beings. Their purpose is determined by their creator and their achievement of purpose can be marked only in relation to their accomplishing of their endowed purpose. Purpose is really just a measure of a goal's accomplishment. This is purpose in a prescriptive sense. An outside source prescribes a goal for one to achieve.



Many today, however, attempt to find their purpose through descriptive means. Descriptive means are the only option on the table for materialists. While many religious individuals have been drawn into this sort of thinking as well, its origin really comes from a more naturalistic philosophy. If individuals are not created and are therefore not endowed with purpose from the outside, the only other way one can attempt to find purpose is descriptively. We can observe what sorts of actions tend to lead towards survival. We can observe what sorts of actions tend to make societies function well. We can observe what kinds of actions cause us to feel good. Taking all of these descriptions about the way things are, we then attempt to assume a conclusion that doesn't follow. "If X action makes me happy, I should do it." How does such a conclusion follow? The assumption from such a statement is that there is some purpose endowed within me that implores me to fulfill my happiness. Here I am not talking about some feeling that makes me want to pursue happiness, but rather some goal or purpose that says it should be. In a world formed by chance and aimlessness, why *should* it be that I find happiness? This path may, on the surface, sound all well and good, but it leads to some intuitive conundrums for those who embrace it. As an example, the suicidal individual can make the same sorts of descriptive claims as any other hedonist. The normal hedonist may make merry on wine, but the suicidal makes merry in death. The claim made by the suicidal hedonist makes them just as right in their pursuit if one follows this modern "as you wish" sort of "logic." For if there is no true goal or purpose for the suicidal individual – if they can create their meaning - then why should anyone stymie their "purpose?"

This descriptive sort of purpose finding is vacuous, as purpose can only be found, and only in a world with prescription. Prescription brings intention, description does not. In a world where there is no creator, all things boil down to a description of mechanistic, deterministic or chance processes. Nothing endows us with a prescribed goal that produces purpose. In a world where there is nothing above us to prescribe, then, men are drawn to becoming their own source of purpose through personal prescription – and what does man want but to prescribe himself happiness and the enjoyment of pleasure? But this notion has a multitude of problems. First, refer back to the suicide example. If an individual finds that their happiness will best come from killing themselves, why should anyone impose their contrary, personalized view on the suicidal individual? Who are you to tell the suicidal individual that their personal prescription for happiness is wrong? The reason for your imposition cannot at all be altruistic, as we shall see. Rather, imposition in a world where purpose is personalized can only logically occur because of your interest, not another's. In the example of the suicidal, friends and family members

prescribed happiness for themselves, and it is their own happiness that would be hampered when their loved one took themselves out of existence! The suicidal individual wants to be happy in their escape, but their closest compatriots won't allow them this freedom, as it would impose upon their own pleasure and purpose. Materialists can't answer any other way, since imposing upon someone's personal perception of what would make them happy is to prevent them from achieving their goal – their purpose.

Beyond the contradictions and absurdities mentioned above, such a view of self-created purpose is one that is impossible to implement in the first place. As I stated previously, purpose is something that must be endowed with intent. Inanimate matter cannot endow something as it has no intent. Complex forms of matter, like man, however, are able to endow other objects with purpose because man can intend goals. An ax, for this reason, can have a purpose. Its job is to cut down a tree. Its job can also be to kill, to blaze a trail, or to be a bookend. Its creator and/or its wielder can endow an ax with purpose. An ax, however, cannot endow itself with purpose. But this inability to endow self with purpose is not merely because the ax is not sentient, but also because something cannot endow itself with purpose. The man who endows an ax with purpose would be just as unable as the ax to endow self with purpose.

To illustrate, think of how absurd it is to say that one creates their own purpose. Imagine that a woman desires to be happy, and she finds that her happiness is best fed through altruism. She feels happiest and most fulfilled when she helps other people. Notice that when she performs altruistic actions, though she is in fact helping others as she intended to do, the purpose lies in the act of helping, and its function is to provide the woman with the happiness which is her goal. The woman here did not endow herself with purpose, but endows her actions of altruism and/or those in need with purpose. Her giving to charity or feeding the poor has purpose - to make her happy, but she herself does not have purpose.

Now one might argue that the poor or needy who are helped by such an altruistic woman are served by her, and therefore they can endow her with purpose. This is certainly true. One who is in need of food can seek another person, endow them with the purpose of feeding them, and then receive what they desire. But this is no conciliation to those who establish a system of self-purpose, for their goal is to be the masters of all and to be master to no one. How would accepting prescribed purpose from others - being objectified by all - be more palatable than accepting purpose prescribed from the creator God? Understanding that one's purpose cannot

originate from within means that purpose must come from some other source (God, other humans, etc). On materialism, the only available source is other sentient life - our equals. While many of us may be ok with being endowed with purpose for the sake of altruism, mankind has all sorts of other goals that are nefarious. Nobody wants to be endowed with the purpose of being a human experiment, a sex slave, a murder victim, etc. But if man is the creator of purpose, all men are able to equally endow as they see fit, and there is ultimately no objective standard with which we can push back. The most one can say is, "I don't like that."

In a world where sentient beings are the only endowers of purpose, everything becomes an object to us and we an object to everyone else. Our desire to fulfill our goals prevents us from wanting to be used for another's purpose, but in a world where all others are endowers of purpose, it is impossible for us to live without being objects. Objectification works functionally to achieve desired outcome in a world with no God, but it only works if the Golden Rule is followed. However, in this materialistic context, the Golden Rule actually becomes a utilitarian notion rather than an altruistic one. I do unto others not because my purpose is to actually help or care for others. I am willing to be an object of purpose for someone else only because it increases the chances of another becoming an object for me.

A great example of this concept can be seen when we look at jobs and hobbies - both tasks in which purpose is endowed. When we participate in a job - even businessmen and women who create their own businesses - workers are essentially the objects of their customers. We could never say that an individual creates their own job. While a savvy businessperson may recognize a particular job that isn't being done, they are not creating a job but rather recognizing a need someone else has. When they "create" and perform their job, then their job is to do the bidding of their customer. They become objects for their customer's use. Their customer pays them in return, of course, becoming an object for the businessperson, but it is the customer who endows the worker with the purpose of his work. The worker doesn't do a job just to do a job, but rather to do the bidding of their customers. This exchange is the materialist's golden rule in action. I create a service you need in hopes that you will provide me with fungible assets.

Someone may reply that sometimes individuals do jobs or activities just to do them. They may pull weeds in their garden because they enjoy gardening or because they want to. They may go fishing - not to eat - but to enjoy nature, nostalgia, or some other calming thing. However, in these instances, the "job" of gardening or fishing is often something we'd call a hobby, or something that brings us what we want. When we do jobs only for our enjoyment we are not all of a sudden endowing ourselves with purpose. My purpose or job is not to pull weeds

or to fish. Rather, the job or task of fishing and pulling weeds serves me. These activities have been endowed with the purpose of making me happy or providing me with some sort of pleasure. It may feel good, be calming, increase my social capital and standing, or whatever – but it serves me.

The Bible may not have invented the Golden Rule, but the way the Bible presents the Golden Rule is the first and only - as far as I'm aware -of its kind. Its spin on the “rule” is significantly self-sacrificial and altruistic, and consistently so. Whereas other Golden Rules may claim altruistic cores or tendencies, these aspects are rather facades and thin shells of a deeper, juvenile and immature form that generally boil down to self-interest. Other Golden Rules help us to assess how to get what we want from others (by doing to them what we would want). On Christianity, however, we are to measure our goodness to others by our own desires. The Bible’s rule has the moral imperative that derives from purposed prescription in creation. Other Golden rules have us measuring how to get the most out of others for our good – or they lack moral imperatives. They’re simply nice ideas. Christianity's Golden Rule has us measuring how to get the most good out of ourselves for others. This is very different from most/all other forms of the notion.

We have already seen how the idea that we can create our own purpose brings about inconsistency in our actions towards suicidal individuals and in claims of altruism. We have also seen how it is actually impossible to endow oneself with purpose. But even beyond these two major criticisms, self-created purpose also runs into a problem due to its reliance on the huge assumption that our existence and natures warrant following in the first place. When one feels as though altruism, money, sex, masochism, or any other sort of thing will make them happy and give them purpose – why are we to believe that such notions warrant following? This assumes that the way we are is the ideal. And if we are the endowers of purpose, I suppose it makes sense for us to objectify everything else for the purpose of appeasing whatever nature chance has given to us. But once again, such a realization makes the self-creators of purpose inconsistent, for it is intuitive to us all that some forms are more desirable than others. This is the concept that was largely explored in the previous segment on beauty.

Transgendered individuals have desires based upon who they think they should be. They are trapped in the wrong body. The disabled have desires to be otherwise – to be healed – as their bodies aren’t as they should be. When one has OCD or a form of phobia, they and we often seek to change that because we recognize the way they are is not desirable. We all recognize that there are good forms and not as

good forms, ideals and non-ideals. If the physical, mental, hormonal, and the like can all fall short of the ideal, shouldn't we expect the same of our desires? We all recognize that this is the case when we impose our ideals of "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts." We have interventions for those struggling with addiction even if they want to remain in their addiction. We encourage, mandate, or impose treatments on the suicidal or clinically insane even if they don't think they need treatment or want treatment. We all understand that there are more than subjective ideals and mere descriptions. If there aren't objective ideals and prescriptions placed upon us through creation, than these impositions upon others are pure self-serving hypocrisy. The proclaimers of self-created purpose say that one creates their own purpose and decides for themselves what is good, yet they impose their views and prescriptions on others at times. They do this because they intuitively understand that there are objective truths and ideals about how we should be. To adhere to a notion of self-created purpose once again defies consistency with what we all know to be true at the deepest intuitive level – ideals exist that are defined beyond myself.

Now I have already given the materialist a consistent way to fight back, and that is to acknowledge that there are no ideals but selfish ideals. The addicted, the suicidal, and the mentally ill are provided compulsory assistance not because there is an ultimate ideal or because other people care about them for their sake, but rather because people care about them for their own sake. There may not be an ultimate ideal, but that doesn't mean I can't push for my ideal to be ultimate. Consistent materialists recognize that they want their suicidal friend to change because they value the relationship and the happiness it brings them, not because they truly care about the individual. They can fool themselves into thinking they want their friend saved, but they really want the relationship and its benefits preserved. If our purposing stems from our happiness, and our purposing objectifies, what other conclusion can the materialist draw? They are objectifying their friend to produce happiness for themselves. While I am not a fan of materialism, I don't think many of them are pessimistic enough to believe that this is really the way the world works. I suppose I should count my blessings, as it's better for them to be stubbornly inconsistent than consistently heartless. Are there objective truths about the way things should be? Is there an objective moral law that says we should love others for their sake? There must be some explanation for the materialist who is willing to defy their own law of self-purposing to overrule another's nature and system of self-purpose.

The Christian notion, however, endows humanity with purpose from the outside. Humanity was made to be in relationship with God, man, and nature. We were

meant to love and to be good stewards of these relationships. Even more, Christianity provides us with true pleasure and happiness, as God made man to have dominion over creation, to create, and to enjoy. So even when we take pleasure in hobbies that serve us, we can find true joy because we are fulfilling the creation mandate. The creator has endowed his creatures - us - with purpose. We should then seek to fulfill this purpose, and are only truly fulfilled by doing this. This means there are standards, guidelines, and models of systems and being that are true and which we should seek to follow. When we see something broken and out of place from how it should be, we seek to fix it and set it right. It is in this sense that the Bible paints discipline and reprimand. To correct someone who is wayward is to love. To allow them to continue on a path towards destruction is hateful. But our culture often reverses this, viewing reprimand, dissent, and judgment as that which is evil. Christianity explains the notions of purpose we all feel, notions of a rightness we all recognize when we push back against disorders and say that there is a true way people should be. Christianity makes sense when we think of the Golden Rule, as most of us know it in our deepest heart to be a truly altruistic rule, not a utilitarian one. Christianity makes sense when we think of meaningful and loving relationships that don't exist just for our sake, but for the sake of another. Christianity just makes sense.

The final question that arises, then, is “what about God?” If God is uncreated and is the ultimate endower of purpose, then what of God's purpose? It would seem that God cannot have purpose if he is uncreated, and at the moment, I would agree with that. God does not have purpose. Purpose flows from God – from his nature. If we could say God’s “purpose” was anything, we would say that it was just to be who he is. God just is God and does God actions. So when God created his creatures, he created them as an outpouring of who he is: good, loving, just, beautiful, etc. Their purpose is meant to display and proclaim who God is, and to manifest his attributes in relation with all other created things. God is perfectly satisfied in this and needs no purpose because he is the source of **all** things (important emphasis), the uncreated creator – the relational trinity.

Humans, on the other hand, are finite creatures whose coming into existence demands an explanation of purpose. While we can, as sentient creatures, choose to endow other things with purpose in whatever way we desire, we do so only when we objectify those things, and we do so at the cost of throwing off the existence of created ideals that we all know exist. Following the purpose of the one creator leads all things into harmony, edifies all, and always leads to love. Following the purpose of selves set up as gods leads to selfishness, pain, and dehumanization. We cannot create our own purpose and live consistently or harmoniously. We may find

moments of sanity and harmony, but I imagine the madman and tone deaf find such moments every now and then as well. The materialist can find meaning in the sense that they sometimes enjoy pleasures or experience happiness, but they enjoy and experience those things devoid of a purpose. They are pure consumers who will one day be consumed, that the worm may enjoy the same vapid pleasure and experience of happiness a good meal brings. For the worm has just as much purpose as the materialist on their system.

Instead, we must find our purpose as the one who has endowed us with it has revealed. And what is our purpose? To live a life glorifying to God by loving and enjoying him and by loving others as ourselves. Our desire for our own well-being is the measure for how we are to treat others – and that fulfills our purpose. Our purpose is to live in right relationship as defined by God. That not only means we reflect the attributes of God, but that we also recognize the ideals and structures of relationships that he set in place. By doing that, we are fulfilled in our purpose and we glorify God.

## Appendix 2.2: The Impossibility of Creating Your Own Purpose

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/the-impossibility-of-creating-self-purpose>

The issue of purpose couldn't be more important than it is today. As much of the Western World shifts away from religion and towards atheism (particularly materialism), they are left with a gaping hole in their lives. Without moral commands or the divine direction that once guided individuals and nations, many irreligious are left searching for that which can infuse their lives with purpose. Most end up landing on some system of self-purpose because it's easy, convenient, and unobtrusive. This system of self-purposing generally means that each individual must figure out or fashion their own purpose in life. Once a purpose is identified, then life can meaningfully be lived.

While self-purposing sounds fantastic (who wouldn't want to just follow their own desires?), there's one problem for materialists. Self-purposing is incoherent on their system. It can't be done. It's absolutely unintelligible. To discover why materialism cannot provide purpose - and especially self-purpose - I'll explore deeper the concept of purpose.

### **Purpose is Imported**

What is the purpose of an Axe? Well, I suppose that depends on who you ask. The maker of an axe may describe one purpose to you, and a lumberjack may agree. Lizzie Borden, however, may take exception with the lumberjack. For Lizzie, the purpose of an axe was to take human life.

The first observation we can make about purpose is that purpose is something which is imported to an object. An axe is merely an axe and has no purpose on its own. It only obtains purpose when an outside object (its maker, a lumberjack, or Lizzie) imports purpose to it. However, that concept may be hard to see since axes are born with purpose as they are fashioned by makers (like William Paley's watch necessitated a watchmaker). So let's talk about rocks.

Most of us would agree that a rock we find in the middle of the desert is, for all intents and purposes, purposeless. It's just a hard object which formed over a long period of time and, through natural and impersonal processes, ended up residing in the desert. Rocks have no purpose in and of themselves. But the snake who lives under this rock may believe (if snakes can do such things) that the rock has great purpose. To the snake, this rock may serve the purpose of preserving its life. To a wayward or adventurous explorer, the rock may be purposed as a seat upon which



she can rest. So while the rock in and of itself has no purpose, it can obtain purpose from the outside when others import purpose to it.

Objects must be wielded (used, implemented, etc) to have purpose.

### **Purpose Requires Three Entities or Parts**

Let's think a little deeper about the rock in the desert and identify the components of purpose present. First, we have a rock sitting in the desert. It is simply a neutral, un-purposed object. It merely exists. However, when a traveler comes across the rock, she is able to import purpose into the rock. At the point the traveler imports purpose into the rock, the rock is no longer a mere object, but an instrument. The traveler is able to transform the rock into an instrument because she is a "purposer." Finally, we have a "goal," which in this case is rest. Notice that our goals are generally (maybe always, I don't know) intangible concepts. So while the traveler physically sits down on a rock, her goal is not to touch the rock with her posterior, but to rest. One who uses the rock for a home may find physical shelter, but they do so for a more intangible concept of safety or comfort. Though goals may often be represented in objects which are physical, the ultimate goals are usually more intangible concepts which are physically embodied.

To make things a little simpler, here's a picture of the components required for purpose, and the direction purposing flows:

Purposer --(purpose)--> Instrument --(action)--> Goal

Notice how we have three separate components here. This is extremely important to understand to make sense of our future discussion.

Let's expound on this concept a little more. Let's imagine that we just had a rock, with no othersentient creatures around. Would it be possible for the rock to have purpose? Of course not! The rock would just sit in the desert until it eroded away into nothing. Admittedly, that example seems stupid. Rocks can't think. For the sake of argument, then, let's extend the example by giving the rock a mind and volition. But before we do that, let's take a brief detour to lay a foundation for our understanding of materialism.

### **What is Materialism?**

Materialism says all that exists is physical. There is no supernatural and no immaterial. While certain aspects of this seem apparent and inconsequential, the deeper implications of materialism are significant as it pertains to purpose. If

materialism is true, not only are rocks, trees, and rivers material, but feelings and thoughts are material as well, manifesting as physical synapses firing in a physical brain. Love, volition, desire, everything - absolutely everything - is simply material. Without a "ghost in the machine," a soul to act upon the material, this means that every action, thought, and feeling we have is simply an inevitability which results from prior conditions created by a cause and effect sequence initiated like dominos all the way back at the Big Bang, until the moment your synapses fired to produce action and caused you to inaccurately perceive intent.

### **Purpose Requires Immaterialism**

With an understanding of basic materialist implications, return to our rock in the desert and give it a mind and some will - but no legs. Note that on materialism, the thoughts this rock has are really just physical processes occurring in cause and effect succession. The rock couldn't think other than what it thinks. Please note that this is not very controversial for most intellectual materialists. This is the largely understood belief they hold about cognition and self. Taking the mainstream materialist view on cognition, this rock scenario provides us with two types of thoughts nature could impart to the rock - thoughts which correspond to reality or thoughts which don't.

The first path for the rock would be for nature to impart true thoughts to the rock. The rock may think, "I desire to sit here, a bastion in this barren landscape, to impart beauty and rest for any weary traveler who may pass by, before I weather and erode, becoming one with the earth again." And so, the rock does just that. It sits there in the desert, adding to the desert's landscape, and eventually dissolves back into earth. The rock's desires corresponded with reality. The desires are aimed towards that which will likely happen given the nature of what a rock is. The rock desires only those things of which it is capable, and the rock desires things which nature will inevitably make happen. Perhaps nature rewarded the rock with good feelings for the correspondence of its beliefs with reality. In the end, however, the rock's true thoughts weren't prescriptive, though the rock may have perceived them as such. As the rock neared its demise, it may have reflected back upon its life and thought about how accomplished it was for pursuing the purposes it identified as those worthy of pursuit. But ultimately, we observers who understand geology know that the rock simply underwent inevitable processes we could have explicitly described and predicted with our knowledge of how our mechanistic world works. The rock's perception that it was purposing or prescribing for self, then, was actually simple descriptions of what actually occurred and what could not have occurred in any other way. Nature was just kind enough to let the rock in on its ultimate fate ahead of time. Nature gave the rock desires which corresponded with

the reality to which nature would lead the rock.

The second mental path for the rock on materialism is to have thoughts and volitions which don't correspond with future reality. Perhaps the rock believes that one day he will be a star. He will traverse the rugged terrain, cross vast distances, and join some band of like minded rocks. With this rock band, our rock star would change the world. While this immovable rock may have had lofty aspirations, those aspirations never had the possibility of being achieved. But nature has no concern for truth, and so this rock could have spent a lifetime pursuing the impossible while achieving only the inevitable. To our rock, he may look back on his life and identify his failed purpose as misfortune or missed opportunities, or he may thank the rock gods for unanswered prayers because he loved his life and realized his dreams would have really made his life a nightmare. But all of that is really irrelevant. Nature did what it did and it couldn't have been any other way. The feelings and beliefs of the rock are irrelevant.

Regardless of the rock's thoughts and their correspondence to reality, notice that in both examples, the rock accomplished nothing. In a materialistic universe, both the rock's ultimate fate and the rock's course of actions (including mental actions, like the rock's own thoughts) were determined. No matter what the rock thought (or rather, whatever thoughts nature dictated to the rock), his destiny was to sit in the desert and be eroded into dust. The laws of physics couldn't have it any other way. While such a thing is easy to understand with an immovable rock, the same is true of we humans on materialism. Though we are more complex than rocks, we are mere matter in motion, set on an unavoidable course - a determined course which includes even our thoughts.

This is exactly where materialists start to go very wrong in their assumption that we can purpose ourselves. As I explained above, purpose requires three things - a purposer, an instrument, and a goal or end. To get those three components, materialists unwittingly smuggle immaterialist notions in their assumption that we can purpose ourselves. Materialists import an immaterial "self" or a soul into their equation. Materialists act as though I (purposer) - purpose my physical body (instrument) - to accomplish some goal. There's a huge problem with that. There is no distinct "I" on materialism! They are borrowing a concept that only dualism can give them - something only possible if humanity is composed of a body and a soul - some immaterial third party distinct from the body. However, on materialism, there is no "self" separate from the body and physical processes. We may perceive that we are distinct entities from our corporeal bodies or that we have a "self," but this concept is really just a chemical fiction told in our brains. Like our rock star

friend, the failure of our beliefs to comport with reality has no bearing on our ultimate end. It only serves to placate and delude us into a life which tends towards survival, until we, like the rock, return to dust.

What happens when we remove a third entity, the "purposer," from our equation (*Purposer --> Instrument --> Goal*)? Without prescription, without intentionality, and without this third party, we're left with a far different equation.

*Cause ---> Effect*

or

*Action --> Reaction*

Causes are impersonal, and so are effects. A cause only becomes an instrument when it is purposed. An axe is an object, and an axe was the cause of Lizzie's parents' deaths. But the axe, purposed as a weapon in the hands of a third party purposer, became more than a mere cause. It actually transformed into an instrument in the hands of Lizzie. The same could not be true without a purposer. An axe could not have transformed into an instrument in the "hands" of something impersonal, like the wind. The wind has no intentionality, and were it to blow an axe onto the heads of Lizzie's parents, only an unblameable natural disaster would have occurred, not a murder. Likewise, Lizzie's parent's dropping dead from something impersonal, like cancer, would simply be an effect. But when they dropped dead at their daughter's hands, their deaths were more than a mere effect of some impersonal process. Their deaths were a realized goal (at least from Lizzie's perspective). On materialism, the deaths of Lizzie's parents are no real tragedy, but rather were an unavoidable outcome of materialistic, cause and effect processes. A coherent world of materialism removes the possibility of purposers. Without purposers, despite what your mechanistic brain may tell you, you are purposeless. And without a distinct "I" or "self," there's nothing you can do to add purpose to your own life. You're just part of the universe. You are simply an object formed by causes and heading towards unavoidable effects. While you may hope the effects of your life are not similar to those of Lizzie's parents, only time will tell and there's nothing you can do about it.

### **Rebuttals and Counter-Rebuttals**

At this juncture, some materialists may argue that while we may not purpose ourselves without an immaterial soul, we could certainly be purposed by another being - a third-party. Just as the Axe was infused with purpose by Lizzie, so, perhaps, I could be infused with purpose by another (lover, friend, etc). But there are two major problems with this.

The first problem is that on materialism, there are no third parties. We're in a closed-system. All that exists is matter and the laws of this universe/multiverse. While we humans may create words and terms to differentiate unique formations of matter throughout the universe, there is nothing in the universe which demands that these things be distinguished. Let me provide an example to help illustrate.

There is a popular kid's song on the internet now entitled "Finger Family." If you don't think it's popular, it's because you don't have toddlers. Trust me. In the song, all of the five digits of the hand are named (mother finger, daddy finger, etc). Now, I can go around and name all of the parts of my body, big and small, from every quark in my body to every large structure. However, we all understand that it would be ludicrous of me to believe that when you're talking to me, my finger, head, or any other part of me is distinct from ME. My self is composed of all of me and you don't have to address every part of me. You simply address me. Everything that you are composed of is a part of you, and while we can distinguish different formations and compositions at different parts in your body, and while we can assign different vocabulary for different features, all parts of your body are still you. I fail to see how a materialistic universe would be any different. Sure, there may be a lump of flesh over there which I identify as Tom, and one over there I identify as Sally. But each human, like me, is just going through the mechanistic, cause and effect processes I'm going through. We're all part of this one universe - we compose the universe's "body," with no distinguishing otherness that demands I identify one person or object as one thing, and another as a separate entity. Distinguishing different parts of the universe is a useful speech fabrication, not an observation of genuine otherness. While we can acknowledge distinct features, features are very different than distinct identities, volitions, etc. If the universe dictates everything and we are all part of this one universe, then we have no reason to think there is any legitimate "party," any party beyond this one universe, or any party beyond this one universe which is an intentional being.

While this first response undermines the logical coherence of believing a third party can purpose us in a materialistic universe (since there are no clearly distinct third-parties in a materialistic world), the second problem lies with the intuitively moral incoherence of such a system. If a materialist wants to argue that the only way they can maintain purpose is by saying that we receive our purpose from others, then we have some major disconnects here. What could the materialist say about the rights of African slaves in the Americas? Even if the materialist pretends such things weren't inevitabilities in a mechanistic world, and even if the pretended like there are legitimate identity differences which could allow distinct human

beings to purpose others, they would still have no grounds to say that such a travesty as slavery was wrong. If we receive our purpose from others, then surely others can ascribe whatever purpose they desire to us. So long as one group is stronger and more domineering than another, they can pursue whatever purposes they desire and win. Now try telling that to the sex-trafficked girls or the victims of barbaric despots. For as angry as Dawkins and Hitchens get at a God who dictates our purpose and value, how could they not be more put off by other ignorant mortals being the determiners of their value? Certainly we may be living in such a hopeless world where the powerful can purpose as they wish without transgressing any objective morality, but if we do live in such a world, our speech about human rights needs to shift from one which implements absolute truth language to one which uses preferential language. "I don't like slavery, but if someone wants to do it and can, that's their prerogative." If you don't like that option, the alternative is to just keep living inconsistently in self-delusion about the incoherence of such a system and the nonexistence of objective morality and purpose.

The only possibility for materialists to escape their purposelessness is to fabricate some unexplainable "self." Assuming this unfounded and non-explanatory explanation, surely if I purpose myself and you purpose yourself, then it would be wrong of you to use your will to encroach on my goals. While this view would carry a number of huge issues like moral intuition and oughtness/obligation, our inconsistency in stopping suicidal people, etc - perhaps the worst part of it for materialists is that it invokes a "gaps" argument. "We don't know, it just is" isn't the type of explanation seemingly scientific materialists like to invoke, and one they often critique. Yet it's all I can see they are left with when discussing purpose formation in a materialistic universe, other than simply admitting that life is meaningless and we have no purpose.

### **Purpose on Immaterialism**

The big question for me, then, is, does Christian immaterialism get us something better? It most certainly does.

On Christianity, God, an immaterial being, creates ensouled humanity. Humanity has one choice before them - the choice to submit to the purposes of their purposer, God, or the choice to attempt to create their own purposes. Notice how Adam and Eve have a soul, and in theory can purpose themselves because they are dualistic creatures. Their souls - their selves - are able to use their bodies as instruments for the purposes they fashion unto certain ends. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve attempted to create their own purposes rather than submit to being instruments of their creator God. While it was possible for them to form their own desired

purpose, God's warning that such an action would be devastating came true. You can use a hammer to hit nails, as the maker intended, but you can also use it to smash tight lids off glass jars. But hammers were made for one thing by their maker, and to use them otherwise will often lead to damage and ineffectiveness. Adam and Eve, in pursuit of their own fashioned purposes, threw off their maker's design and purpose, and as Lizzie in her misuse of the axe, have wreaked havoc on the human family.

My big question, however, is whether ensouled creatures are truly able to create their own purpose. When Adam and Eve rebelled, did they at least lead a successful rebellion? Did they at least create some momentary pleasure and self-purposing as they raised their fists to God? In the end, it seems that to me that they failed. Their self-purposing failed not only because it threw off the maker's intent, but also because it ended up reorganizing our equation. Take a look at God's equation versus Adam and Eve's self-purposing equation below.

God's Equation: *Purposer (God) ----> Instrument (Humanity) ---> Goal (Glorifying God in Loving Community)*

Self-Purposing Equation: *Purposer (Humanity) ---> Instrument (Whatever We Choose) ---> Goal (Self-fulfillment and Pleasure)*

Here's what's intriguing about our fallenness and self-purposing - only instruments have purpose. As humble instruments in the hands of God, we could recognize our purpose, submit, and end up living in love, fellowship, peace, and fulfillment. But when we self-purpose, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we are infusing purpose into ourselves, when we're really infusing purpose into objects. We call this idolatry. Take, for example, farming. If I toss God to the side and say that I feel called to be a farmer, I will be fulfilled by living off the land and producing crops to provide for my loved ones and community - notice that I'm actually infusing purpose into farming rather than myself. (Me--->Farming--->Fulfillment). When we attempt to create purpose rather than recognize our purpose, we end up infusing purpose into objects we use for ourselves. On such a system where we attempt to create our own purpose, we still end up being purposeless ourselves not because we don't have a purpose, but because we fail to recognize our purpose as instrumented by God. Self-purposing not only fails on materialism, it falls short on Christianity as well.

God has created a beautiful world. In this world, fulfillment comes through our submission to God's design, being instruments for service and love. How ironic is

it that true fulfillment calls us to be willing instruments who serve others? But when you think about it, how awesome would a world be where you never had to question someone else's motives (or your own for that matter)? What would it be like to live in a world where you never had to question whether every other human being had your best interest in mind? Everyone would be at your service and would be looking out for your best interest, knowing that you were likewise not seeking to manipulate or objectify them. I think such a world would be a lot like Eden. We worshipers of individualism may think that being an instrument sounds terrible and condescending, but such is not the case when your maker is love. By foregoing this intended submission to God and neighbor and world, we not only sin by creating idols and worshipping self, but we lose any chance at having true, lasting, purpose and fulfillment.



## Appendix 3: Heaven on Earth

<http://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/july-17th-2016>

Most parents presumably want their children to not only live, but to enjoy life and cope with what it throws at them. As parents, you have to fit this overtime job into your full time job. It is a 16+ hour a day job of parenting. And if you have other commitments outside the home as well, your workload multiplies quickly. Days become monotonous lists of waking up to a cry, dressing, feeding, changing diapers, cleaning up messes, reading a book for the 100th time, enunciating a word for the 1000th time, changing more diapers, feeding again, laying the kids down for a nap, fitting in your house chores to the 90 minutes you have "free" during nap time, ending up only getting 60 minutes because your kid wakes up early, changing another diaper, feeding again, reading a book for the 101st time... And that's only half of the day.

But despite the monotony and exhaustion of the parenting endeavor, parenting is also a fun, energizing adventure. In many ways it is a return to one's own childhood. Do you remember how exciting it was to chew gum for the first time? I didn't, until I got to see Elin's excitement at her first experience chewing gum the other day. I never knew I had the capacity to become excited about such a common act as the chewing of gum - but I did. Do you remember how exciting it was to jump off the side of the pool and into the water - a whole two inches? I didn't, until Elin experienced this for the first time the other week. I was experiencing the excitement of a mundane action that had become new. Enriching your child's life makes the monotonous endeavor of parenting wonderful. Seeing their reactions to what we now feel are mundane experiences is pure joy - both for them and for you.

As adults, we tend to search for the same childlike joy and excitement. We are constantly pursuing that which is new. Jumping two inches into a pool leads to jumping on trampolines, then jumping off high dives, then bungee jumping, and then skydiving. Riding tricycles leads to riding bikes, then to riding motorcycles. We humans love new experiences. We can also see how our love of new experiences shows up in our love of new information. Just about any nature show you watch on a particular animal today - regardless of how common the animal is - begins by a statement of astonishment at how little we truly know of this animal. If nature shows solid programming based solely on what they knew, this admission of ignorance would be damaging. But nature shows hit a nerve much deeper than simply disseminating facts. They understand we want to be left with the excitement of pursuit. While scientists and educators pursue the attaining of knowledge, there is something exciting and comforting about knowing we are nowhere near the end

of our intellectual endeavor.

Beyond the physical and intellectual experiences, humans also seem to have a desire for new relational experiences. For some, this means dating for life, pursuing excitement anew with the conquest of each consecutive lover. In a monogamous relationship, that means continually pursuing the excitement of learning about your lover and cultivating the depth of the relationship.

Unfortunately, the former course seems to be the most sought course now. Much of what we hear today are notions that center around being "in love," "whatever makes you happy," "do what's best for you," etc. If one gets tired of a relationship, one moves on to the experiencing of a new relationship. We also see this in the way of sexual experimentation. While plain old intercourse may be fine for the teenage virgin, someone who has had many experiences with many partners wants more than just simple sex. Regardless of which course one takes, we humans love the pursuit of new knowledge and experience.

The goal of modern man today, steeped in materialistic notions, centers around this idea of newness. Advertisers hit on this concept very well. Products now center around the experience. Everyone has worn shoes, but you haven't ever had THESE shoes - the ones that will change your life. But new experience isn't everything, for there are many experiences I will never have due to my life span. This is where science comes to the aid of humanity, as it is able to prescribe how best to achieve both goals of knowledge and life. We currently see these main two goals of science - aiding humans in living forever and in coming into a cause/effect knowledge of everything. There is so much I will never know and experience because I will not live long enough. I want to live forever so I can experience everything. These two statements go hand in hand. Were I to be damned to eternal life on a barren, lifeless planet with nobody around and nothing to do, my life would not be worth living. I want to live to experience and know all things, and to experience and know all things I must keep on living. This sounds like a fantastic pursuit in theory, but such a pursuit ultimately leads to the complete removal of joy - undercutting the very goal of the materialist.

One of the biggest complaints levied against the modern notion of heaven is that nobody wants to go there. Who wants to join a choir that sings forever, a cloud lounge where you play the harp all day, or a garden playground? Some of those things might be fun for a short time, but to have the same experience for eternity seems to go against our nature that desires the new. Everyone seems to recognize that the heaven depicted in popular culture is actually more like hell. Overt materialists, more than anyone else, can recognize such a thing. Yet such a

monotonous "heaven" on Earth is exactly what materialists are pursuing, and what will be the ultimate end for our progeny should the materialists be able to make good on their pursuit of immortality and knowledge.

Were materialists to make good on their pursuit and find out all knowledge about the universe, and were they able to figure out how to extend life eternally, there would come a point where nothing new would exist. On materialism, an individual who is just a complex arrangement of matter could one day be downloaded and reconfigured in artificial conditions, in an indestructible frame much better than his biological one - and such a thing could be repeated as often as needed. Certainly in several billion years, before the destruction of our sun, we would figure out where we could safely go in the universe and live there as we determine how to survive and thrive when the universe's heat death eventually comes. But at that point, in bodies of our creation, we could certainly survive, and would eventually live to a point where we knew all things or could know no more. There would be no new knowledge or experience. This - a materialist's Heaven.

But while materialists are creating the very heaven they condemn, the real redemption Christianity brings is far different from the popular (mis)conception of heaven. Christianity has historically had at its center relationships - particularly the trinity. On top of relationship, Christianity also has at its center an infinite God who can never be fully known. Christianity throws off the pagan's and materialist's notion of true life as the mere continuation of existence - doing the same things we've been doing. Instead, it focuses on living in righted relationships - knowing and being known. On Christianity, relationship and knowing another is the one thing that is dynamic and can provide us with eternal newness. In fact, the Christian end is not heaven - a temporary place for disembodied souls - but rather the New Earth, where all relationships are made right (nature, others, God, self).

At this juncture, the materialist may claim that their world would have relationships, and is therefore immune from the critique that the achievement of its goal would end in monotony. They are indeed correct. Their world does provide relationships. The number three's relationship to two would be that it stands one greater. The square's relationship to a triangle would be that it has one more point and 180 more degrees. And my friend's relationship to me would only be in amounts and degrees as well. In a materialistic universe, even relationships would become mechanistic, predictable, fact based systems. Where everything is physics and chemistry- action and reaction - our choices would amount to the same. Rather than dynamic relationships, these would become static facts like everything else. Relationships would certainly exist in such a "utopia," but they will by no means

be personal, but rather equational. This is the goal of modern neuroscience and psychology - the quantification of man.

Relationships are what make life exciting, as I have already shown with my example of relationship between me and my children. But examples go much farther than immediate family. We all know that it is relationship that breathes excitement into the monotony of life. Everyone has eaten out or had drinks before. It is a monotonous necessity of life. Sure, we can enjoy food and drink, but there is something very different about doing this with others. Whether it is eating out with friends or eating out based on the recommendation of another, our connection to others is what makes a monotonous chore like eating and drinking imbued with excitement. The same thing is true of watching movies and reading books. While we can like movies and books on their own merit, the first thing we want to do with something great we consume is to immediately share how awesome this experience was with others. "You have to see this movie!" Or, to look at it another way, imagine watching a movie or reading a book in which no relationship existed. Imagine anything that you enjoy doing or anything you have to do. Now imagine doing that for the ten thousandth time. Now imagine that you are the only human who exists. How enjoyable would this hobby or task be then? I think it is intuitive to us all that it would be an overbearing ordeal - or at least a very bland one.

Consider this point another way. What would you call someone who finds enjoyment and extreme delight in repetitious acts which are largely devoid of relational depth? You would call them an addict. A man who enjoys the overindulgence of alcohol is an alcoholic and tends to push others away. A woman who consumes meth to the detriment of her body, her kids, and the family from whom she steals pushes relationships away. The parent of one of my middle school students who played World of Warcraft to the neglect of his children's health. This is the world materialists are pursuing – a world in which all facts are known, but where nobody “knows” each other. In this world, there is nobody to know, just objects to know about. In this world, only infatuation and addiction exist.

We can already see one unfortunate consequence of glorifying the experiencing of things over relating to people. Many today who get divorced cite the monotony of the life they lived with another as a reason for their divorce. Their duties and obligations, their sex life, and their time spent together were just boring. They couldn't go on living life so monotonously. But I have to disagree. Nobody leaves a marriage because it is devoid of meaning. They leave it because it is devoid of relationship. Just as eating or drinking find meaning when done with others, so marriage only finds meaning when done with another. But when done by oneself,

pursuing one's own desires and experiences, relationship is destroyed and monotony ensues. And when the individual decides to pursue the monotony of self-centeredness, addiction enters.

This, I discovered, is exactly why Elin's chewing of gum made me so happy. Would I have focused on my miserable, monotonous experience – working in a hot school, using my summer time off to prepare for the next school year, and watching my rambunctious kid perform a trivial action like chewing gum – I would have had no joy. But because I love my child and love growing in relationship with her, my heart leaped. Joy only comes in relationships, and sorrow only from the damaging of them. The materialist may pursue pleasure and happiness, but will never arrive at true joy in restored relationships. But neither will they arrive at true sorrow. In the end, if they are right about the world and are able to achieve omniscience and immortality, they will experience absolutely no joy or sorrow. This is far different from the Christian whose restored world brings true, unspeakable joy as all relationships are made right, with the promise of no sorrow, as relationships will never again be damaged.

Christianity truly seeks to make heaven on Earth. The Christian's job of pushing back against the curse in nature, in self, in relationship with fellow man, and in relationship with God is intended to bring glimpses of a fixed, dynamic creation. Our goal is to one day live in right relationship. The materialist who follows their logic to the end, however, also seeks to create a heaven on earth. But while their current pursuits of knowledge and immortality may seem good now, the end pursued should shed light on the viability of such a worldview. To know about all things and to be known about by all others is very different than knowing and being known in personal relationship. Christianity's restored heavens and Earth is much different than a materialist's Heaven. The only consolation the current materialist may have for their ideas is knowing that they were a generation who didn't have to worry about the depressing ramifications of their worldview, for they are not eternal. At least they got to enjoy life, if only because their death guaranteed they never had to face the consequences of their worldview. And the only consolation they could have for their progeny - the evolutionary goal and purpose of their existence and survival - is hoping that humanity stands no chance of surviving the universe's heat death, and we will all be wiped out before we ever reach such a miserable, eternal existence. Ironically for the materialist, embracing the end of all things is their only hope for current joy, and the only way humanity's eventual mundanity is prevented. For the Christian, however, everlasting life is the promise of restored, never-ending, dynamic relationships that will always be new and never frustrated.

## Appendix 4.1: Ends Cannot Justify the Means

I believe that thought experiments and hypothetical situations are fantastic ways to soften our hearts and show us glaring holes in our belief systems. This is what Samuel essentially did to David when he confronted him about Bathsheba in what is perhaps one of the most powerful displays of such a method used in the Bible. So, I'd like to begin by presenting you with a hypothetical situation that rocked my world for many years.

Imagine, as in the M.A.S.H. clip below, that you are on a bus full of people trying to escape imminent death from persecutors. Your bus pulls off to the side of the road and into some thicket to avoid an incoming enemy patrol. As the patrol nears, your young child begins to scream. What do you do? Do you allow your child to scream so that the fifty lives on the bus are all lost, or do you smother your child so that only one life is lost? Fifty or one? What's the right answer?

<https://youtu.be/sYjy7uUn7fc>

Perhaps I am an anomaly, but for the longest time I thought that the baby had to die. It was an unfortunate scenario, but to allow fifty people to die seemed a greater tragedy. In fact, I have asked quite a number of Christians the same question and I have never had one tell me straightaway that the baby should live. The best I ever got was a long hesitation and debate before some would finally say that the baby should *probably* not be killed. But it was a tough choice. Anecdotally, I don't think my position was anomalous. I think it's what a lot of Christians (at least in the West) would say when answering honestly.

John Howard Yoder was the first person who helped me discover that this question wasn't really a difficult one to answer at all. You don't kill the baby. Not for one life, not for fifty lives, and not for a million. The means of taking a life into your own hands for the end of preserving life is wrong. Yoder's book "The Politics of Jesus" changed my life. Yoder helped me to see some glaring blindspots I had picked up from my experience as a Western Christian. While I sat back and criticized other Christian cultures for being syncretists, it never crossed my mind that I had myself infused non-Christian cultural values into my Christianity. While I could go into a hundred different, profound quotes from Yoder, I think the following quote sums the idea that has been the catalyst to the transformation of some of my syncretistic beliefs.

**ONE WAY TO CHARACTERIZE THINKING ABOUT SOCIAL ETHICS IN OUR TIME IS TO SAY THAT CHRISTIANS IN OUR AGE ARE OBSESSED WITH THE MEANING AND DIRECTION OF HISTORY. SOCIAL ETHICAL CONCERN IS MOVED BY A DEEP DESIRE TO MAKE THINGS MOVE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. WHETHER A GIVEN ACTION IS RIGHT OR NOT SEEMS TO BE INSEPARABLE FROM THE QUESTION OF WHAT EFFECTS IT WILL CAUSE. THUS PART IF NOT ALL OF SOCIAL CONCERN HAS TO DO WITH LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT 'HANDLE' BY WHICH ONE CAN 'GET A HOLD OF' THE COURSE OF HISTORY AND MOVE IT IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. FOR THE MOVEMENT CALLED MORAL REARMAMENT, IDEOLOGY WAS THIS HANDLE; 'IDEAS HAVE LEGS,' SO THAT IF WE CAN GET A CONTAGIOUS NEW THOUGHT MOVING, IT WILL MAKE ITS OWN WAY. FOR OTHERS, IT IS THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION THAT ULTIMATELY DETERMINES THE CHARACTER AND COURSE OF THE CIVILIZATION; WHOEVER RULES THE TEACHERS' COLLEGES RULES THE WORLD...**

**WHICHEVER THE FAVORED 'HANDLE' MAY BE, THE STRUCTURE OF THIS APPROACH IS LOGICALLY THE SAME. ONE SEEKS TO LIFT UP ONE FOCAL POINT IN THE MIDST OF THE COURSE OF HUMAN RELATIONS, ONE THREAD OF MEANING AND CAUSALITY WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE INDIVIDUAL PERSONS, THEIR LIVES AND WELL-BEING, BECAUSE IT IN ITSELF DETERMINES WHEREIN THEIR WELL-BEING CONSISTS. THEREFORE IT IS JUSTIFIED TO SACRIFICE TO THIS ONE 'CAUSE' OTHER SUBORDINATE VALUES, INCLUDING THE LIFE AND WELFARE OF ONE'S SELF, ONE'S NEIGHBOR, AND (OF COURSE!) THE ENEMY. WE PULL THIS ONE STRATEGIC THREAD IN ORDER TO SAVE THE WHOLE FABRIC. WE CAN SEE THIS KIND OF REASONING WITH CONSTANTINE SAVING THE ROMAN EMPIRE, WITH LUTHER SAVING THE REFORMATION BY MAKING AN ALLIANCE WITH THE PRINCES, OR WITH KHRUSHCHEV AND HIS SUCCESSORS SAVING MARXISM BY MAKING IT SOMEWHAT MORE CAPITALISTIC, OR WITH THE UNITED STATES SAVING DEMOCRACY BY ALLIANCES WITH MILITARY DICTATORSHIPS AND BY THE THREATENED USE OF THE BOMB...IS THERE NOT IN CHRIST'S TEACHING ON MEEKNESS, OR IN THE ATTITUDE OF JESUS TOWARD POWER AND SERVANTHOOD, A DEEPER QUESTION BEING RAISED ABOUT WHETHER IT IS OUR BUSINESS AT ALL TO GUIDE OUR ACTION BY THE COURSE WE WISH HISTORY TO TAKE?**

"The Politics of Jesus" is all about how Christ's life is prescriptive for our own. It is not prescriptive for us in that we live like Jesus by being single, an itinerant life, or that we grow a beard like Christ. What is prescriptive is that we love the outcasts and the sinners, turn the other cheek, take up our cross, and ultimately lay down our lives for others. In fact, this sums up Christ's teaching on the law (love God and love others) and it is also the one way he said that others would know we love Christ - that we love each other. Yoder turned my world upside down by telling me that these things are actually true. He told me that my role as a Christian isn't to attempt to direct history through various, accepted power structures, but to lay my life down as a sacrifice for others.

I know that Christians are thinking right now that I'm crazy. Of course you know this. Maybe you do. But I really think we struggle with this truth as Western Christians. Here's the problem we have - we have become "ends" Christians rather than "means" Christians. We Americans are so efficiency minded and goal oriented that we have made Christianity an attempt to accomplish the end of bringing about our vision of what God's Kingdom should be without using the means that he prescribed. But isn't this very thing the root of so much evil in the Bible? Subverting God's means to accomplish what we believe the ends should be?

Adam and Eve ate of the Apple because they didn't trust God's means. Cain killed Abel because he was jealous that Abel was favored for following the means that God had prescribed in sacrifice, whereas Cain did not. Abraham, attempted to accomplish God's end by his own means, caused so much harm by lying about Sarah, his wife, and mistreating his maid. Moses struck a rock instead of speaking to it and didn't see the Promised Land. Saul offered sacrifices without waiting for Samuel as was prescribed. Israel sought the military alliance of Egypt instead of relying solely on God. And Peter attempted to keep Christ from the cross twice by tempting him to avoid the cup of suffering and take up the sword. Nearly all of these individuals could have rationalized their actions. Adam wanted to be like God. Cain wanted his sacrifice to be as good to God as Abel's. Abraham was merely trying to preserve his life and have a child so God wouldn't be found a liar. Moses was frustrated with a belligerent people for not following God. Israel wanted to preserve itself. Peter wanted to protect the Messiah. Yet these actions were all evil and God punished the evil. At the same time the Bible is filled with stories of those who desired God's ends, yet submitted to his prescribed means that, from a human standpoint, appeared to be antithetical to accomplishing God's ends. Noah built an ark. Moses lifted up his rod. David threw off his armor and took only a sling. Daniel prayed. Samson grew out his hair. Gideon took torches and clay jars to a battle against overwhelming forces. Jesus - God himself - laid his life down



and died at the hands of his enemies.

Yoder's quote, then, should strike a nerve in us as Western Christians. Actually, from the Bible's vantage point, it should strike a nerve in us if we're human. It is human nature to subvert the means that God gives us in order to accomplish the end we think God deserves. And what are the ends that Christians are fighting for today? The abolition of abortion, racial equality, the upholding of family values, religious freedom, economic freedom, etc. Most of the ends we are fighting for are very good things. In fact, when God establishes his perfect Kingdom we know that it will be an absolutely free, wonderful, moral place. Christians are by and large fighting for ideas that on paper are wonderful ends. But I'm afraid we've largely thrown off the means of God.

Paul's famous chapter on love, I Corinthians 13, falls smack in the middle of two chapters that deal with the use of our spiritual gifts. I don't think that placement is happenstance or irony. You want to speak in tongues, evangelize, prophecy, teach, etc? You want to accomplish ends for God? That's fantastic. Working hard for God by using the gifts and talents he has given you is great. But centered in these chapters that tell us all about how God has gifted us to bring about his ends is the passage on love. Paul tells us that no matter what we do, if it does not have love at the core, it is worthless. We can offer what we believe to be the sweetest aroma in the world up to God, just like the Pharisees, but if there is no love, it smells repugnant to God.

So what does it mean to be a "means" Christian instead of an "ends" Christian? Yoder has a lot to say about that and I would strongly encourage you to check out [his book](#). If you don't have time for that, check out [my summary](#) of his biggest ideas. But essentially, Yoder would tell you that being a means Christian is examining our lives and checking it against the prescriptions of Christ's life. Are we taking brothers and sisters to court or are we eating the loss and forgiving for the sake of Christ's name and our brother's soul? Are we vengeful or are we turning the other cheek? Are we spending our time investing in those on the fringes of society or are we investing in those like us and those who advance our causes? Are we taking up our cross against entrenched and corrupted institutions (religious, political, national, business, etc) even though it costs us social and political capital? Are we trusting God's means of humility, service, and love over the means of acquiring power and coercive forces?

Yoder tells us that the best way to examine our lives to see if we are clinging to God's means over ours is to check for persecution. If nobody reviles you - if there's

nobody in your life you would call your enemy, you likely aren't pressing the buttons of society very hard using God's means. This hatred likely won't come from the place you think either. The sinners loved Jesus. It was the zealots whose nationalistic dreams were crushed who ended up despising Christ for failing to bring the Kingdom their way. It was the religious leaders whose power structure and tradition were upended who took Christ to court. It was the Roman government who could afford to let a violent zealot like Barabbas go but had to crucify the peaceful lamb to maintain order in the region. Do you want to know if you're using the means of God? Ask yourself if you have enemies, and if those enemies are sitting in the seats of power of our day. God's means of love upend powerful businesses that exploit others. They undercut the political leaders who are self-serving and indulgent. They trample over empty religion that fails to help the widow and orphan. And that just makes powerful people angry. But that's ok. Our hope is not in working the levers of society, but in the gospel of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

***THIS GOSPEL CONCEPT OF THE CROSS OF THE CHRISTIAN DOES NOT MEAN THAT SUFFERING IS THOUGHT OF AS IN ITSELF REDEMPTIVE OR THAT MARTYRDOM IS A VALUE TO BE SOUGHT AFTER. NOR DOES IT REFER UNIQUELY TO BEING PERSECUTED FOR 'RELIGIOUS' REASONS BY AN OUTSPOKENLY PAGAN GOVERNMENT. WHAT JESUS REFERS TO IN HIS CALL TO CROSS-BEARING IS RATHER THE SEEMING DEFEAT OF THAT STRATEGY OF OBEDIENCE WHICH IS NO STRATEGY, THE INEVITABLE SUFFERING OF THOSE WHOSE ONLY GOAL IS TO BE FAITHFUL TO THAT LOVE WHICH PUTS ONE AT THE MERCY OF ONE'S NEIGHBOR, WHICH ABANDONS CLAIMS TO JUSTICE FOR ONESELF AND FOR ONE'S OWN IN AN OVERRIDING CONCERN FOR THE RECONCILING OF THE ADVERSARY AND THE ESTRANGED...***

***WHETHER JESUS BE THE CHRIST OR NOT, WHETHER JESUS THE CHRIST BE LORD OR NOT, WHETHER THIS KIND OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE BE MEANINGFUL OR NOT, MOST TYPES OF ETHICAL APPROACH WILL KEEP ON FUNCTIONING JUST THE SAME... THE CROSS IS NOT A RECIPE FOR RESURRECTION. SUFFERING IS NOT A TOOL TO MAKE PEOPLE COME AROUND, NOR A GOOD IN ITSELF. BUT THE KIND OF FAITHFULNESS THAT IS WILLING TO ACCEPT EVIDENT DEFEAT RATHER THAN COMPLICITY WITH EVIL IS, BY VIRTUE OF ITS CONFORMITY WITH WHAT HAPPENS TO GOD WHEN HE WORKS AMONG US, ALIGNED WITH THE ULTIMATE TRIUMPH OF***

## **THE LAMB.**

**THE VISION OF ULTIMATE GOOD BEING DETERMINED BY FAITHFULNESS AND NOT BY RESULTS IS THE POINT WHERE WE MODERNS GET OFF. WE CONFUSE THE KIND OF 'TRIUMPH OF THE GOOD,' WHOSE SOLE GUARANTEE IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE PROMISE OF THE ETERNAL GLORY OF THE LAMB, WHICH AN IMMEDIATELY ACCESSIBLE TRIUMPH WHICH CAN BE MANIPULATED, JUST PAST THE NEXT SOCIAL ACTION CAMPAIGN, BY GETTING HOLD OF SOCIETY AS A WHOLE AT THE TOP. WHAT IN THE MIDDLE AGES WAS DONE BY ROMAN CHRISTIANITY OR ISLAM IS NOW BEING ATTEMPTED BY MARXISM AND BY DEMOCRATIC NATIONALISM. IN SPITE OF ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN LANGUAGE, AND IN THE DETAILED VISION OF JUST WHAT A GOOD SOCIETY WOULD LOOK LIKE (AND AS A MATTER OF FACT EVEN THE VISIONS ARE NOT THAT DIFFERENT), THE REAL UNIQUENESS OF EACH OF THESE POSITIONS IS ONLY THAT IT IDENTIFIES DIFFERENTLY THE PARTICULAR MORAL ELITE WHICH IT HOLDS TO BE WORTHY OF GUIDING ITS SOCIETY FROM THE TOP. WE MAY WELL PREFER A DEMOCRATICALLY CONTROLLED OLIGARCHY TO SOME OTHER KIND. WE MAY WELL HAVE A CHOICE BETWEEN MARXIST AND ISLAMIC AND OTHER STATEMENTS OF THE VISION OF THE GOOD SOCIETY. BUT WHAT OUR CONTEMPORARIES FIND THEMSELVES PRACTICALLY INCAPABLE OF CHALLENGING IS THAT THE SOCIAL PROBLEM CAN BE SOLVED BY DETERMINING WHICH ARISTOCRATS ARE MORALLY JUSTIFIED, BY VIRTUE OF THEIR BETTER IDEOLOGY, TO USE THE POWER OF SOCIETY FROM THE TOP SO AS TO LEAD THE WHOLE SYSTEM IN THEIR DIRECTION.**

**ONCE A DESIRABLE COURSE OF HISTORY HAS BEEN LABELED, ONCE WE KNOW WHAT THE RIGHT CAUSE IS, THEN IT IS FURTHER ASSUMED THAT WE SHOULD BE WILLING TO SACRIFICE FOR IT; SACRIFICE NOT ONLY TO OUR OWN VALUES BUT ALSO THOSE OF THE NEIGHBOR AND ESPECIALLY THE ENEMY. IN OTHER WORDS, THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE GOOD CAUSE, THE IMPLEMENTATION IN HISTORY OF THE CHANGES WE HAVE DETERMINED TO BE DESIRABLE, CREATES A NEW AUTONOMOUS ETHICAL VALUE, 'RELEVANCE' ITSELF A GOOD IN THE NAME OF WHICH EVIL MAY BE DONE.**

I am writing this as the events in Charlottesville are still fresh in everyone's mind. For as terrible as the murder of protesters was, it seems as though it has been the first time nearly everyone has banded together to condemn racism. Everyone, even some of the white supremacists marching in Charlottesville, know that the murders that occurred were wrong. While in one sense I find this spark of unity encouraging, I don't have to look too far to be discouraged. Though nearly everyone is united in condemning this truly evil act, that unity is quickly broken as everyone scatters to take up arms, seeking the appropriate levers of society that can create change. They all, even Christians, seek the means for revolution and change that belies their true belief about where power lies in society.

I believe that most Christians don't need any commentary on the symptoms we've seen displayed time and time again - Charlottesville just being one more festering wound. We know evil when we see it to this depth. But what Christians do need is commentary on what means we should pursue to resolve this gaping wound in our nation that just grows bigger and bigger, often exacerbated by the means we choose and the powers we coddle for change. Some Christians woke up the day after the events and began immediately pursuing political means. Republicans have been out in force defending President Trump in his weak condemnation of the Charlottesville events, defending the American freedom to protest no matter who you are, etc. They're bolstering their ends that the Republican platform brings them: religious freedom, lower socialization of systems, and more restrictions on abortion. To show weakness and lose the power of the platform is to be anti-Christian. Aren't these ideals the things that most glorify God? Isn't it better to prop up the party that brings about God's ends than join arms in solidarity and show weakness? At the same time, Christians who are Democrats came out in force berating Republicans for creating such a hostile climate that could culminate in Charlottesville, discussing restricted freedoms of protest and firearms, how to pursue impeachment, and who to run for the presidency in 2020. They too want to ensure that Charlottesville is used as a powerful catalyst to prop up their political party.

Regardless of which side of the aisle you're on, if you're a Christian, different aisles are the wrong place to be. Christians who believe that the gospel is about Christ's Kingdom come should believe that the true seat of power in this world is the Church. The Church is the hands and feet of Christ in the world. God brings about change through his Church, Christ's very presence in this world. Jesus calls his Church to serve, love, and sacrifice as the means through which his end and glory is brought about. Taking up our cross is quite different than crucifying the opposition. And while taking up our cross may be a foolish means, it is God's

means. We see in the Bible that women in the church were told to keep their heads covered for the benefit of others in their culture, though they knew that freedom in Christ meant that they weren't below men. That's likely why they started taking their headcoverings off and bucking the cultural norm in the first place - because they recognized their dignity and position in Christ. Slaves in the church were told to remain in servitude and work hard for their masters, even though the gospel told them they were free men who could be leaders in the church and who were just as valuable as their masters. That's likely why Onesimus ran to Paul, as he sought his freedom and dignity under Christ. Slaveholders in the church were told to love their slaves like brothers, even though doing so would mean that their financial property and investment could no longer be treated as such. If a slave was your brother, how could he remain your slave? That's likely why the institution of slavery largely disappeared in the Roman empire as Christianity spread. A group of people who love, serve, and self-sacrifice even though they know they are sons of God is the only group that can change the world, though it may require us to die before we can experience the resurrection and new life.

Right now, Christians on all sides of theological and political debates are deciding how to garner the attention of all the powerful institutions in the nation. Christians are talking about the presidency, congressional elections, supreme court justice appointments, lobbying, corporate sponsorships, advertising companies banning the speech of certain groups, gun control, dehumanizing the evil white supremacists who are made in the image of God, dehumanizing Antifa proponents who are made in the image of God, deflecting the issue by bringing up peripheral sentiments as if they negate the problem at hand (e.g. "white lives matter too"), and the list goes on. The assertion of coercion and power - these things are the wisdom of the world. They are mechanisms at which we grasp in an attempt to guide history towards a certain end of our own liking, an end we often attribute as God's own end. And while some of these actions and pursuits may not be evil in and of themselves, when they are a subversion of the means that God has not only given us, but demonstrated for us, they are a forsaking of our God and his transformation in our lives.

So what are we to do, Christians - little Christs? Let's live up to our name. Let's be the church. Be his body. Be the foolishness of this world so that when lives are changed, beginning with our own, the end that we so loudly claim to pursue - God's glory - will undoubtedly be brought about. For who could accomplish anything through such foolish means but God? Martin Luther King Jr., one of the greatest activists in the last century, believed that God worked through such foolishness when he said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do

that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." King, imperfect as he and all humans are, not only changed the societal landscape, he imaged Christ to the world. So we don't like what happened in Charlottesville? Let's pray for the lives and souls of the injured as well as the lives and souls of those who injure. Is our God so weak that he can heal only the bones and not penetrate the hateful heart? Let's keep our mouths closed in our defense or our party's defense and mourn for what has happened. Let's move beyond Charlottesville and love beyond this one event. Let's drive a little farther to a church of those who aren't like us racially or economically. Let's use our free time to tutor the underprivileged. Let's get to know someone from the other side of the political aisle and chat with them over a coffee we purchase. No more coercion. No more vitriol. No more attempting to shout louder than the opposition. No more grasping at control - at the levers of power in this world. When you are carrying your cross, your hands aren't free to grasp at anything else. Let compassion, sorrow, and forgiveness be our first emotion when looking on people who are filled with hate. Let's mourn. Let's serve. Let's love. Let's cling to the power of the body of Christ.

Right now, most of us measure our lives by how well we avoid persecution, how well we forcefully impose our sense of morality on others, and how well we accrue comfort and wealth. I have to ask whether we're using the appropriate metric. The metric of Christ not only indicates that our current measures are wrong, but also that we are a long way from the metric of Calvary. We allow Christ to bear his cross and relish in this thought, while refusing to bear our own. We are like the disciples when they knew only crucifixion without the promise of resurrection. We scatter in the face of hardship, scared that our fate may be like our crucified savior's. We are not like the disciples who knew and had truly seen the risen Christ - fearlessly living under their sovereign king and obedient to him alone, even when his decrees seemed foolish and lead to a torturous end.

While the world stands in need of those willing to die to self, willing to love all people actually and unconditionally, we Christians all too often seem content to let Jesus do the dying alone, as we grasp at the very powers Jesus pushed aside - the very powers that killed him. We allow our savior who was sacrificed once for all to die over and over again as the only example of love we're willing to share with others, an ethic that we are unwilling to exemplify. We are all too often not disciples, but freeloaders. We've counted the cost of discipleship and found it too rich for our blood, yet suitable for God's own. We maintain the power politicized moralism grants to us and live our lives as self-proclaimed demigods rather than servants, decreeing ourselves as the righteous while we condemn those unlike us. We refuse to even consider dying the daily death of sacrifice. For the sake of our

agenda we forsake all others, while a savior asks us to make him Lord and change the world by forsaking ourselves. Let's remember where true power comes from and what true power looks like.





## Appendix 4.2: The Lesser of Two Evils and How Moral Pragmatism Undermines God's Benevolence

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/the-lesser-of-two-evils-how-moral-pragmatism-undermines-gods-benevolence>

Imagine that time travel has been discovered and you have the opportunity to travel anywhere in history you'd like. Being a Christian, there is nothing more you desire than to go back and be there for the most influential moment in the history of the universe, the trial and crucifixion of our savior Jesus Christ. As you enter history, you slip into the crowd standing before Pilate and hear the offer Pilate is making to free one prisoner to the crowd. Being a part of the crowd, you can choose to free Jesus, the innocent, Barabbas the murderer, or a thief. You know your Bible and understand that Jesus has no hope of being freed. The crowd wants his blood too badly. But maybe, just maybe you and those who traveled back with you could influence the result between the thief and Barabbas. Maybe you could have the thief freed instead of the murderer. While you might not be able to save Jesus, you may at least be able to lessen the injustice that occurs in this situation. So do you vote to free Jesus, the innocent man, though your vote will have no influence, and allow a murderer to walk free? Or do you vote to mitigate a greater evil by voting for the lesser evil which has a chance of winning, though it would mean failing to support justice for the innocent?

I have already explored this scenario when discussing [the morality of how we vote](#). I concluded that accepting the moral validity of a "lesser of two evils" [LOTE] option is a morally compromised position. Here, however, I want to explore how the acceptance of a LOTE morality undermines our theology and our Christian hope. A strong theology and hope are of utmost importance for Christians. Theology is what grounds our faith and actions while hope is what gives us the strength to implement the hard truths of what theology often teaches. Theology may teach us that enemies should be loved, but how can you love your enemy if you don't have a hope that one day true justice will be exacted - if you don't believe that God will vindicate the righteous? Theology may teach us that God is sovereign, but how can we embrace God's sovereignty if we don't have hope that God is for us and will bring all things about for our good? Theology and hope are inseparable in the Christian religion.

Going back to our initial question, it seems apparent to me that the moral answer for any individual in the crowd at Jesus's trial is to vote to free Jesus. Our moral duty is not to base our actions upon what we perceive the outcome will be, but rather to base our actions on what God has decreed to be good. But I don't want to argue the morality of this decision here. I've already done that a little bit elsewhere, where I addressed the moral aspect of this issue. Instead, I want to explain here why choosing a lesser evil over which you have control undermines a Christian's hope.

When we think about what we're saying when we choose the LOTE, it goes something like this. "I could make a moral decision to vote to free Jesus, but my vote would have no impact in this situation. For me to have any influence on the here and now, I need to act in accord with a lesser evil and choose to free a thief rather than a murderer. This failure to support justice for the innocent and my choosing to side with a lesser evil is excusable because it minimizes the amount of evil done in the world at this moment. Were I to vote for Jesus, an innocent man would be killed AND a murderer would go free. But if I embrace a lesser evil approach, while I don't side with the innocent Jesus, I lessen the amount of evil that is realized. In order to create the best immediate future, I must fail to adhere to the most moral path at present. My choice to deny the good will then be justified because of my pragmatic motivation to mitigate or lessen evil. "

Such a position is certainly understandable. We recognize the frustration we would have of casting a vote we knew would have no impact on the situation at hand. But when we dig deeper, we come to see that no amount of sympathy for this position can justify it, and no amount of sympathy can save us from the despair it brings. The main issue with the LOTE ethic is that it says *we can embrace an evil now because it produces the best temporal results, as far as we can tell*. This is problematic for a number of reasons.

**1. A LOTE ethic throws out the theology of God's moral decree.** We assume that our assessment of situations can trump God's standards and expectations for us. This is a huge issue because it makes morality subjective to our evaluation rather than objective and based upon God's decree. On the LOTE ethic, morality loses its

basis in God's moral decree and standards, and rather becomes subjective to our perceptions of effectiveness, and our assessment of how such effectiveness is brought about in a given situation.

**2. A LOTE ethic undermines the theology of God's sovereignty.** We do the right thing because it's the right thing, trusting that our perfect and sovereign God will accomplish his good will. When Joseph went into slavery, when Gideon whittled down his army, when Stephen preached the gospel in the midst of killers - these things happened in the face of what seemed to be ineffectiveness and defeat. But God was in control of all these things. With Joseph he was sovereign even through the evil of the brothers. With Gideon, he was sovereign over the enemy of Israel. And with Stephen, he sovereignly graced him in his death and preserved his soul as it entered God's presence. In all situations, God is sovereign. Sometimes he brings about immediate good here and now. Sometimes he brings about future good in this world. And sometimes justice and goodness are only realized in eternity. Our job is not to determine the ends and the timetable for the ends we desire. Our job as Christians is to be faithful in our obedience, trusting our sovereign God to accomplish his ends through our faithful implementation of the seemingly foolish means he has prescribed. Implementing a LOTE ethic tells God that we can't be faithful in our moral purity and obedience, as we need to guarantee the good end which we cannot trust him to accomplish.

**3. A LOTE ethic undermines our defense of God's goodness through evil.** I have written quite a bit about [the problem of evil](#). I find it to be one of the issues which most sidetracks Christians, and which prevents non-Christians from believing in God. There are many theodicies we can provide to defend God from the accusation of evil. The soul building theodicy says that the allowance of evil may be necessary to build souls which will perfectly choose to remain in the presence of God for all eternity. The best possible worlds theodicy and the free will theodicy argue that God has created the best world he could possibly make with free creatures, and that though evil is present, God's creation of the best possible world where the most souls would be saved and the least amount of evil experienced will ultimately justify God's allowance of evil.

But all of these theodicies fall apart if we begin arguing for a lesser of two evils

ethic. We justify the LOTE ethic by saying it is our job to bring about the greatest temporal good we can perceive - or that it is justified because we mitigate a greater temporal evil from occurring. But wouldn't such an ethic destroy our theodicies? If the temporal, physical, here and now situations are what determines the morality of our actions, then God cannot be let off the hook for all of the temporal evil throughout history. God could have stopped Joseph's brothers from selling him into slavery. God could have stopped the Holocaust. God could have always brought about good and mitigated evil in all circumstances throughout history, though doing so may not have lead to the greatest possible good, a universe where free creatures could exist, the largest number of people would know God, and the least amount of evil experienced. In every circumstance of evil, God could have used his omnipotence to bring about lesser evil at that moment. If a LOTE ethic is what justifies our actions and determines morality, then God cannot escape his immorality in his allowance of evil at any given moment.

By arguing that we must at times embrace evil to bring about the greatest good, we arrogantly proclaim that God doesn't know what he's doing by giving us his decrees. Rather than viewing God's moral decrees as blessed tools we use for worship, obedience, and life, we view them as helpful suggestions which are generally true, but which may often be ineffective. Valuing what we perceive as temporal effectiveness over what God tells us to value, we claim the attribute of omnipotence for ourselves. We act as though we know how to bring about the greatest good, while God does not. We declare that we must sometimes embrace evil - the antithesis of God - and implement our own means, as we simultaneously deny the means of God.

I would argue that it is our morality which is askew, not God's. It seems obvious to me that our job is not to determine a course of action based on perceived outcomes, but based on the known ethics and standards of God. God's ethics are not based around circumstances, subjectivity, and compromises with evil. His ethics are eternal, immutable decrees which flow forth from his very nature. It's this fact which not only undermines a LOTE ethic, but which Christians rely on to escape from conundrums like [Euthyphro's dilemma](#). If you accept the LOTE ethic, it seems to me that you have a lot of explaining to do to get God off the hook for

evil under your ethical standards, while simultaneously maintaining the God which orthodox Christianity teaches. If we embrace the LOTE ethic, we lose our hope for a benevolent God in an evil world.

**4. A LOTE ethic undermines hope, and therefore our influence in the world.** If God is not benevolent and if he doesn't always uphold that which is moral, Christians lose hope in this world. We lose assurance of God's promises, we lose a confidence in the wisdom of his decrees, and we lose hope in the intentions God has towards us. When we lose hope, we lose trust, and when we lose trust, our actions fail to correspond with what God has decreed. The LOTE ethic puts us at odds with God, as it goes against his decree of sanctification, holiness, and a refusal to partner with evil. It declares our ethic of efficiency as an ethic which is higher than God's ethic. When we live such an ethic out, it not only saps our souls of hope, but it makes our actions ineffective at exemplifying the gospel. It dims our lights and causes our saltiness to lose its savor. Let me provide a few examples.

A Chinese businessman converts to Christ. In his culture, it is common practice to treat customers to drunken parties, prostitutes, and other sorts of gifts, as well as being common practice to bribe officials. The Christian businessman knows these things are wrong, but he feels that keeping his lucrative business could provide a huge amount of money with which he could support the underground church. Not only that, but without his business, how would he support his family? For the greater good, he feels that he must compromise with evil to keep his business, generously uphold the underground church, and keep his family fed and housed. Surely it would be a greater evil to give up such a blessing from God.

While we can sympathize with this man's plight, and while we can recognize the great sacrifice it would be for this man to lose his business, surely we can understand that the right thing to do is not compromise with evil. We don't excuse prostitutes or thieves for doing what they believe they must do to feed their families, so why excuse a businessman? Because he wears a suit and tie instead of taking off his clothes or carrying a gun? We know that God is responsible for sustaining His church, not our financial support. In fact, were this man to be outed in the future for all of his compromises, how much could that

ruin the underground church and testimony of Christ? Those who looked up to this businessman could leave the faith. Other Chinese non-Christians may see the compromises this man made and see Christians as no different than the rest of the world. This man's children would see the actions in which their father participated, seeing not Christ, but hypocrisy and depravity. They may never come to know Christ. All that this man would do to "support the church" would really just be things he did to support himself, as he refused to trust God and follow Him in holiness. We may be able to empathize with such a plight, but surely we can't condone this course of action.

We all recognize the disobedience in choosing a LOTE. We would never advocate that we hire a pastor who was an open adulterer or a pastor who didn't believe in the trinity. We would leave the position vacant for all eternity before we agreed to get behind someone who used their position for evil or to spread untruth. Yet when it comes to business, politics, or other areas of our lives, we are willing to bow to evil for what we deem to be efficiency. We think that our morality is a tithe, 10% we give only on Sundays, only at church. But such is not the case. God owns all and requires all obedience and trust. We cannot excuse a siding with evil. If we do, we betray our lack of faith in God, our belief in our own moral ethic, and our lack of hope in the character of God.

The more I think about the LOTE ethic, the more it becomes apparent to me that it cannot work in a Christian worldview. Not only does it compromise us morally as we embrace evil, but it causes us to lose ground in our theology and our hope. Sure, it may be disheartening to think that our obedience to God may often make us ineffective at times. But this ineffectiveness is only seeming ineffectiveness, for a sovereign God has all things in his control. It is only a sovereign God who can assure us that he will bring about our good, despite all evil, as Romans 8 declares. This is a far more hopeful declaration than the declaration of those who say it is up to us, finite and fallible beings, to determine what will lead to the greatest good, and decide our morality according to such limited assessments. The ends are in God's hands, and so must be the means. Be holy as he is holy. Stay the course.

\*\* If you want to explore another specific example of how embracing moral

compromises undermines the reliability of God, check out "[If Lying to Save Lives is Moral, We Can't Have Confidence in the Bible.](#)"

## Appendix 5: God the Utilitarian

I am a utilitarian at heart. I want to fix everything and I want to do everything efficiently. I have found that while utilitarianism can provide some much needed perspective at times, I have also found that I feel a profound tension between the embracing of this view and the throwing off of it.

On the one hand, it seems that being utilitarian is very detrimental in many ways. First, and most obviously, it can be harmful to relationships. Many men share my utilitarian leanings and fail to listen to their wives. Rather than allow their wives to be heard, husbands try to fix problems and end up creating more tension. At the same time, the old saying "the ends justify the means" - an apt summary of utilitarianism followed through - seems obviously wrong in a universe where objective morals exist. Nobody wants to live in a world where all that is deemed right is determined by what works. In such a society, forced euthanasia, infanticide of children with particular disorders, sterilization of certain groups, etc - would not only be enacted, but they would be the reasonable thing to do.

But at the same time, utilitarianism seems like an absolutely Christian notion to me. In fact, it seems like one of the most Christian conclusions one could ever draw, for when God created, he called his creation very good. It was as he intended. And when God redeems, it is and will be very good again. God is a God of order and made the world to work. So it seems as though when one finds something working, they have found something good. It is the footprint of our God of order.

I am not the only Christian who seems confused by this. There are many Christians out there who betray such utilitarian notions when they argue against homosexuality with statistics that point to negative consequences of such relationships. The Christian assumption is that marriage was meant to be between one man and one woman, so when it's not, it will not function properly. This improper functioning will be proven through a multitude of displayed deficiencies in mental, physical, and relational health. That makes sense to me. If God is orderly and he created marriage, then marriage should work. But the same Christians who cling to utilitarian arguments in regard to sexuality, throw off notions of utilitarianism when it seems all too convenient. If Christianity works, then why do Christians have staggeringly high divorce rates? If Christianity works, why do so many Christians engage in premarital sex? If Christianity works, why do so many churches split and why are there so many denominations? If God is real and wants people to know him, why does he remain so hidden? The list could



go on. It seems like a religion that should thrive on utilitarianism falls so short so often.

As I have been thinking about this upcoming election, I have thought even more about utility and Christianity. I have been asked by a portion of conservative Christianity to cast my vote for the candidate who serves the conservative agenda. It is a call for me to vote in a utilitarian manner. Vote for what will advance the conservative agenda and my comfort. And that's when it struck me. Utilitarianism is most certainly true. What does work is good. What does advance my agenda is good - but with a very important caveat. My agenda will and should be advanced if it is aligned with God's agenda. While Matthew 7 tells us that God will give us every good gift if we just ask, and Matthew 6 tells us to ask and it will be given to us, both of these notions are preceded by the concept of seeking first God's kingdom. It is only when we make God's agenda our agenda that utilitarianism really works.

Unfortunately, humanity tends to place God's seemingly foolish agenda last. Self-sacrifice, mercy, and humility have never been all that appealing. All Christians understand that we are all fallen, though we all too often only see the outside world as the fallen ones. But if I truly believe that I live in a world where everyone - Christians included - are fallen, then much of what is lacking in Christian utility makes sense. I understand why Christian marriages fail. Two self-centered sinners married each other. I understand why Christians succumb to sexual temptation. Two sinners with God-given sexual appetites mar God's intention and indulge their lusts. See, God's agenda works perfectly, but we spend most of our waking hours superimposing our agenda over his - and calling it "God's agenda."

It was here that I realized any distaste I had in my mouth for utilitarianism was because utility is defined by the agenda, and so often the determining agenda is not God's. God says to love our neighbors by laying down our lives. We think we do well by agreeing with God that we should love our neighbors, but think that this love is conveyed by heavy handed laws and mandates. God says to bear one another's burdens, and we tell God that we agree with him, but we apply limits to the amount of burden God can expect us to bear. God has commanded us to seek justice for the poor, but we lessen the weighty call we are to meet by saying he only meant for us to help the "deserving poor," not those who are poor of their own making. This is a bastardized version of creation and reality, and only furthers pain and sin. And as Christians seek what works based on their own agenda rather than God's, it pushes away the onlookers who are outside the faith. And who could blame them? Why would anyone want to embrace a religion that so blatantly

doesn't work?

Fortunately God has made his agenda very clear. He has shown us what works, not through commands, but through the incarnation. The commands we read and attempt to perpetuate through legislation miss the whole point of God's plan. For the law that was written on stone tablets could never be followed. The law must be written on our hearts - hearts that have been turned from hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. But here we stand, conservatives trying to chisel away at the impenetrable granite faces of deeply entrenched hearts, when it is only the finger of God who can soften a heart of stone to write his decrees upon it. But for these hearts to be changed, they must encounter God face to face on the mountain top. We are a city on the mountain top. We, the church, are where God meets them. His presence is always with us, and our faces should be ever shining to those around us. As we allow God's presence to pervade every aspect of our lives, true utilitarianism will prevail.

Our God is a God who works. He is utilitarian. That is hard to believe because we spend most of our time judging him by our standards of functionality. He may use foolish means. He may use weak people. He may not gauge success by expediency. But he will bring about his glory. He will accomplish his plans. He will uphold the law. He will judge all of our actions - according to his standards, not ours.

## Appendix 6: The Crutch of Christianity

<http://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/crutches>

Christianity is a crutch. Never has a truer statement been made. Christianity is a belief for the weak, helpless, and hopeless individual. What more could one expect from a religion where a "Great Physician" is the centerpiece? I have heard such a claim levied at Christianity fairly frequently. Good, American, self-made individuals take issue with such a religion because casts don't have bootstraps by which one can pull themselves up, and are rather cumbersome features. They impede self and produce dependence. Who needs a crutch when one has proven with their life that they are self-sufficient - they are hindered by nothing? Many Westerners are therefore functional atheists, denying their need for a God who is just a crutch.

As I've thought about the pejorative quip leveled at Christians, I have questioned how such a claim is self-evidently an attack. Is it degrading to tell an individual with a broken leg that they need crutches? One who is in need of healing should have no shame when taking the appropriate measures to make the healing happen. Perhaps the reason an individual became lame is embarrassing, but that injurious deed is done and cannot be taken back. The healing process, however, should not produce shame. This is the first thing I realized about Christianity versus atheism. Christianity acknowledges that this world is not as it should be - that we are not as we should be. Our broken relationships, our broken bodies, and our broken world are in need of healing and redemption. The crutch of Christianity allows us to move through a world in which we would otherwise be immobile due to fear, despair, and helplessness. Christianity is indeed a crutch. When a child dies, on Christianity, there is hope that God is sovereign and will bring about ultimate good. When a tyrant destroys lives, there is hope that God is sovereign and will bring about ultimate justice. On the crutch of Christianity, there is mobility in this broken world, as the crutch of hope grounded in the promise healing looks to the future restoration of what should be, and propels us towards that hope.

Most atheists are probably fine with my characterization of Christianity so far. IF Christianity were true, some of these aspects could provide us with great hope. However, because Christianity is so obviously false, it is a delusional system intended to soothe us through this life. But in reality, Christianity is no true comfort at all. It doesn't provide us with healing, but rather false hope. I think this is a fair claim. If Christianity were false, it would be a terrible sort of remedy. It would be the greatest snake oil scam of all time. It would be a tragedy - a travesty. For if Christ is not raised, we are more than all men to be pitied. But if Christianity were replaced with atheism, would delusion and false hope disappear?

Let's assume for a minute that Christianity is false and atheism is true. Let's assume that the world throws off all religion, as Lennon encouraged, and embraced pure materialism. Would our world be devoid of crutches? Certainly not! Materialism is a system that is built on crutches and relies on them for survival. On materialism, many aspects of humanity that dig into our deepest intuitions seem clearly false and delusional. Your sense of free will (as most intuitively understand the term) in a mechanistic world governed by physics and chemistry is delusional. On materialism, love as we deeply understand it to be is overthrown. We are determined creatures who don't act on love, but rather are acted on by our physiology to "love." Love becomes pure, determined reaction. Altruism, on materialism, boils down to self-interest, as the late Christopher Hitchens himself so eloquently told the world. A plethora of the core emotions and actions of humanity - the very things that make life livable and meaningful- logically dissipate on materialism. Yet they don't really dissipate. They are kept around as crutches, for the materialist who so despises the delusion of Christianity cannot avoid the crutches his own system requires him to bear in order to continue choosing existence over demise. The atheist, like the Christian, recognizes that this world is broken. The atheist, like the Christian, is lame.

But here lies a significant difference between the crutches of Christianity and the crutches of materialism. On Christianity, if it is true, the crutches are intended to bring individuals and the world to a point of restoration and healing. They are intended to do what crutches should do. Belief in Christianity brings one hobbling through this life until the crutches can be thrown off for a body made whole, a world made right, and relationships restored - until faith becomes sight. But on materialism, if it is true, the crutches are an inherent, perpetual part of the system. They dull the pain rather than bring it to healing. One is forced to believe - for sanity's sake - in things that cannot be features in a materialistic universe. If materialism is true, one could certainly throw off the crutches and embrace pain, suffering, and mechanistic determinism - but who would want to embrace such brokenness? And if a mechanistic universe is what we have, who could blame anyone for not embracing such a horrid truth, for chemistry and physics determine that they believe what they do. One may be able to embrace such a world for the sake of the truth, but what would we be embracing truth for if all of our deepest emotions and intuitions evaporate, and we are just determined, hopeless creatures? Truth has no more inherent value than delusion on materialism, especially where truth inhibits one's ability to live this life. It seems that delusion is an integral part of atheism. And if materialists are ok with crutches, then why dismiss crutches that center around the delusion of religion?

It is hard to believe that we exist in a materialistic universe that goes against some of our deepest intuitions. This is particularly the case when it comes to love. Love is a powerful thing. In fact, it is so powerful, that it drives some to become atheists. It has often enough been through the death of a loved one that an individual comes to denounce their faith in God. For whatever reason, only a minute before, they were content with the deaths of all the billions who had died previously. Yet when death touches something they themselves cherish, they ask, "how could God allow such tragedy to strike me?" That is almost always the phrasing of the question. It is not "how could God allow such tragedy?" but rather "why do I have to experience such tragedy?" The love the atheist convert had for their precious deceased is so strong, it pulls their faith to the grave with their beloved. But in denouncing God's existence, the convert to atheism throws off much more than the tyranny of God and the crutch of dependency upon him - they inadvertently throw off the tyranny of love. For where only matter exists, true love and its binding claim upon us cannot. Like the man who refuses to get his family a pet because he doesn't want to go through the heartache of eventually having to put it down, so it is with a logically consistent atheist. To prevent the pain of loss, they throw away the very thing that drives life - the basis for love. They will never be hurt by God again, and they will never have a reason to hurt. Love nothing, lose nothing. But in losing the basis for love, the atheist ends up truly losing their deceased forever, for their beloved can no longer be loved, and in fact, never was - for love is merely a delusion.

Fortunately for the Christian, life and love does not work this way. We not only have a basis for love, but a God who is not an atheist. Rather than our God denying that he had ever loved, he bore the pain of sacrifice and loss to prove to us that not only does love exist, but it exists in greater measure than we could have ever imagined. Our God embraced the tyranny of love. Our God is love. He preserved and magnified this love so that we too, even through our darkest days, could know that true love really does exist, and therefore, so does a relational God. And he did it propped up by two pieces of wood.

## Appendix 7.1: God's Ordination of Evil

<http://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/god-and-evil>

One of the hardest ideas for me to work through in the Christian faith is the notion of evil. Don't get me wrong, I think Christianity handles evil far better than any other worldview. Atheism has to dismiss evil as non-existent or as a socially agreed upon, linguistic fiction. There isn't really any such thing as evil, just events, actions, and feelings that a majority of individuals and cultures dislike enough to cause them to band together and suppress others who perform such acts. Morality on atheism is just majoritized preferences or observed patterns for bettering survival chances and/or pleasure of the species.

The Eastern religions and pantheism, on the other hand, tend to dismiss evil as a figment of our imaginations, or misguided ignorance - opposing our very strong intuitive notions of evil as malicious injustice that needs righted. Rather than making up a subjective fiction, like atheists, they acknowledge evil for what it logically is - nonexistent. In a world where everything is god, and everything is nature, what can possibly be "wrong?" Evil, then, is simply just a word used to describe a lack of understanding. Polytheists (if they exist anymore), like the ancient Greeks, end up clinging to a pantheon of gods that are just as tainted with evil as mortal man - leaving out any hope of resolution. Evil is just a natural truth that is a byproduct of an agent's choices and desires. And really, it's just a massive power struggle for the pantheon to fulfill their own desires, so evil ends up simply being fated inconvenience for those who are in the way of the more powerful. Evil is just the collateral damage of another's pursuit of fulfillment. We exist at the whims of gods, and maintain our existence by being of use to them or staying out of their way.

The other monotheistic religions tend to come the closest to dealing with evil in a satisfying manner, acknowledging its wicked, painful, and very real existence, yet denying both the ultimate depth of evil, and the ultimate hope for resolution. On most monotheistic systems, evil seems to be something inherent only in the pagan - an outsider sometimes not only of the faith, but also of the nationality or cultural background. On these systems, evil is something "out there," and what really needs to be done is for God to fix the rest of the world, but preserve the believers who have avoided evil and have maintained their purity. Individual believers are not in need of transformation. On this view, evil is a measure of how much better a believer is than an unbeliever, and may be one reason why monotheism has been at the root of a number of bloody conflicts. Unlike polytheism, which is often more

open to alternative gods and viewpoints, and pantheism that denies evil's existence altogether, monotheism tends to produce very rigid and narrow expectations and procedures. In a system that views the problem as outsiders or non-adherents, this can lead to extreme measures in some cultures and time periods. In many ways, this rigidity also applies to atheism, as its core is all about a right methodology to achieving a particular end. That may help to explain why atheism has also been a core worldview at the heart of some of the largest atrocities the world has ever known.

Christianity, however, provides the most realistic and full view of evil. It is one that allows us to weep in agony over injustice, acknowledging as objective truth that evil **should not be**, while at the same time, recognizing the depth of evil's roots into our own lives, and the lives of all mankind. It throws off atheist and pantheistic notions of evil as fiction. It throws off polytheistic notions that we are collateral pawns, fated to existing in a fickle, random world. And very importantly, it throws off sister religions of monotheism and misguided Christian sects that view outsiders alone as that which is broken. Unlike atheism and other forms of monotheism, on Christianity, evil is not the result of improper methodology to which everyone else should adhere, but rather a flaw in **our** nature that is only fixed by grace and right relationship that begins inside **oneself**. On Christianity, all mankind and all of creation has fallen. **We** are tainted with sin. Selfishness and pride bleed into every action **we** perform - even the most altruistic of actions. So to hope for resolution and justice, Christianity recognizes **our own** culpability and the truth that destroying what is evil would mean the destruction of self. To overcome such depths of depravity, only the Son of God could fix us by living a perfect life, paying the price for our evil, and transferring his works of goodness and eventually, bestowing his sinless nature onto us. Christianity has the strongest view of evil possible, and therefore also the strongest view of what needs to be done to resolve such evil. Like one of the great hymns says, "Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great, here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate. Mark the sacrifice appointed! See who bears the awful load! 'Tis the Word, the Lord's anointed, Son of Man, and Son of God."

Beyond our own culpability and need of a savior, Christianity also has every part of creation in need of God's grace and mercy. All that is fixed or will be fixed is done so by God's hand, not by our diligence and devotion. The Christians who have embraced the truth of this gospel not only have the fullest view of good and evil, then, they also have the only grounds for selfless love of others. Though many conservative Christians have fallen into the legalistic judgmentalism of many other forms of monotheism, and some liberal Christians have lost the depths of evil

and holiness by trying to minimize judgment and wrath, orthodox Christianity is the only game in town that grounds good, evil, and love in a way which fits most people's intuitions, and most people's strongest desires.

But despite the fact that on paper, Christianity blows every other worldview out of the water, life isn't lived out on paper. Life is experienced by real people, living in the real world, with their own wickedness, the wickedness of others, and a nature that's broken. While we may know that God created the world good, and we may know that God will make everything right in the end, we're living in the middle. So when we hear about a tsunami that kills hundreds of thousands of people, when we see ISIS terrorizing families and nations, when we hear about children kidnapped and placed into sex slavery, or we experience disease and death within our own close circle of friends and family - logic doesn't take away the pain.

The inadequacy of logic and hope to negate pain, however, doesn't make them illegitimate. While logic and hope may not negate pain, they can certainly cause it to be abated. And more importantly than the dissolution of pain, as good as that may be, logic helps one hold on to the seeds of hope, which when eventually watered, will bloom into a bountiful, refreshing oasis that springs out of the scorching desert of trials. Many dismiss theology as trivial, or as a nit picky endeavor. But the individuals who say such things either have no discipline, or fail to apply the importance of discipline into the spiritual realm. Practice and drills - the fundamentals of sports, music, etc - are dwelt on and reinforced perpetually, at all levels of performance. The reason being that when the real test comes, when the crowd cheers, and when the game is on the line, the ability to think, reason, and perform are wholly dependent on reflex and familiarity, as one's rational faculties tend to fade away amidst great pressure. The same is true of the spiritual life. One who dismisses away the familiarization of theology and right thinking outside of pressure will likely be confused and destroyed when the pressure comes. Building up one's logic of theology and relationship with God prior to hardship is vital to one's survival.

So what do Christians need to know most about evil? We need to know that every evil that enters our lives has been ordained by God. To answer any other way would be to minimize both God and our hope. If God did not ordain all things, including evil, the cross was either a mistake or a lucky fluke. God certainly couldn't have intended it. But Acts 4 seems to indicate otherwise. God intended it, though evil men enacted it. What would become of the cross if God's intention were taken out of it? Were God to not intend for every single one of our



circumstances, evil or otherwise, Joseph couldn't have acknowledged God's provision of his enslavement as a means to saving his family. If God does not intend, plan, and purpose every single event in our lives, then Romans 8 lies when it says that God works all things together for the good of those who love him. At best, a God who does not intend for all of our circumstances simply does his best to react to situations he can't control. But if God didn't control the circumstance of evil that arose to devour me, what hope do I have that he can fulfill his promise to work that situation out for my good? There is none.

This is a very hard truth of Christianity that I have been struggling with recently. The [Westminster Confession](#) and other sources talk about [proximate causes and efficient causes](#) in an effort to ease the difficulty of the truth - but it's still very hard. I understand that God doesn't "cause" evil in the sense that he enacts it, but his bringing into existence a world that he knew would bear evil seems to imply some level of culpability. I can't believe that a just, holy, and loving God could ordain such horrendous circumstances. And it's hard to believe that an omnipotent and omniscient God would ordain a world like ours. But at the same time, believing that God ordains all things is my only hope for purpose in my suffering, and God's intention to give of himself in suffering for my sake the only thing that forces back my accusatory finger. But how can I reconcile God's love and his purpose in evil? And if God does in some sense "cause" evil, then how can anyone stand guilty before him? How can a God who intends the actions of evil men be fair in his judgment of that evil?

As I have been dwelling on this topic for the past few weeks, dialoguing with a few individuals, I came across what I thought was a pretty good analogy. Hopefully it doesn't break down too much, and hopefully it's not sacrilegious in any way - but I think it works. Hopefully it helps you as well.

Those who have been around us in the past few months know that our second child, Atticus, has a crying issue. When he gets upset, he cries so hard and lets out his breath so long, that he literally turns blue and passes out. Within a few seconds, he comes back, and is just fine. Doctor after doctor kept telling us that this was normal, but it seemed extreme to us. They just had to see it, because it wasn't normal. Unfortunately, every time he went into his freak out mode, we were unprepared with a video camera, or were scampering around in an attempt to make a bottle to feed him, discipline Elin for hurting him, etc. We just couldn't get the video. But then, it hit us...

One evening, we saw Elin inching over to Atticus. Early on, Elin had a tendency to

seek out biting or pinching Atticus. She was a jealous defender of her territory, and he was an intruder. It was then that I realized that if I gave Elin a minute or two, she would inevitably inflict pain on Atticus, sending him into his crying fit. But, knowing that this was about to come, I was able to plan the event out. I grabbed the iPad to record the event, and Catalina was ready and waiting to discipline Elin once she made the choice to hurt Atticus. I think this is a great example for exploring God's purposing of evil in the world. I want you to notice a number of ideas that can be pulled from the example:

**1) Atticus's ultimate good came about** - One way that this analogy will break down, is that our human lack of omniscience and omnipotence will mean that we cannot say most things for certain. For instance, I can't say with 100% certainty that Atticus's ultimate good came about, and I can't say that I knew with 100% certainty that such a goal would be obtained through my decisions. However, having the knowledge and power that I did, it seemed like Atticus's immediate well-being was in very little danger, and his ultimate good, as I defined it in this situation (the preservation of his life) was being served. By allowing Elin to make the decisions that she did, and by her eliciting the desired response from Atticus, we were able to record Atticus's response so the doctors could see and advise accordingly. Despite there being pain present, and unjustly so at the hands of Elin, the situation was one that was crafted for Atticus's ultimate good. Likewise, with Joseph, we see that though his brothers sold him into slavery and committed great evil, the situation as a whole was one that God crafted for ultimate good. Joseph's brothers intended it for evil, but God intended it for good, as Joseph himself declares in Genesis.

**2) Atticus's pain was trivial compared to the good achieved** - Atticus's perception of the pain he had to endure at the hands of Elin was tremendous - on par with worst pain he knew from his short little life (being hungry, being frightened by loud noises, wanting to be held). These pains are perceived as being so tremendous, that they elicit very strong reactions of torment in Atticus - so strong that he stops breathing and passes out. From Atticus's perspective (if he could verbalize it), I'm sure there is great confusion as to his suffering on all these accounts, and there is a lack of context for how severe his pain actually is because he knows no other pains. It may also be that his perception of his pain is accurate, and it is our pain receptors that have been dulled and calloused by our constant exposure to it throughout our lives. I don't know. But regardless of Atticus's perception of his pain's severity, or his frustration in not understanding the purpose of his pain, his endurance of that temporary pain and dissonance was trivial compared to the good of sustaining his life. Likewise, the Bible is clear that though

pain and suffering are very real, and our perception of evil's horrendous nature is true, our understanding of our hope for the ultimate good promised to us is extremely watered down. The Bible is also clear that our ultimate good - which Romans 8 defines as being conformed to the image of Christ - often comes through suffering. God's ultimate goal for us is not momentary happiness, but rather the knowledge of him.

### **3) Elin was rightfully judged, though she was an instrument for Atticus's good**

- In this situation, Atticus's good was directly brought about by Elin's evil action. But almost nobody would be willing to argue that Elin should escape discipline just because what she did helped Atticus in some way. Her intent was to hurt him or to assert dominance over him, not to help him. The free choice that Elin made was sinful, so she should be judged and disciplined accordingly. This is exactly what we see in Isaiah 10, where Assyria rises up to defeat Israel, and God intends for them to do so because Israel needs to be judged. But the Assyrians perform God's purpose with malicious intent and in spite of God, not as willing instruments for his judgment. God rightfully judges Assyria for their evil against Israel, though he used their evil for his purposes. It's also why Joseph can call his brothers' actions evil, while at the same time saying that the very same circumstance ordained by the hand of God was good.

**4) Elin's good came about** - This situation allowed for us to give Elin personal freedom to make decisions. That is a good thing in and of itself. On top of that, our intervening hand was ever ready, not only to provide aid and comfort to Atticus, but to discipline and train Elin. Allowing Elin to experience her feelings and express them through her choices is something important for her as she grows. It will allow for self-reflection, for experience, and for knowing one's own heart as it is actually expressed in the moment. Were we to always prevent Elin from expressing her true heart's intent rather than providing opportunities to expose and solve the problem of evil within her, we would be encouraging the harboring of the evil and preventing it from exposure to the light. Elin's good was served in this situation, as she was able to learn about herself, learn about how her actions affect others, and learn about the consequences of her actions. Though the discipline we enacted did bring pain to Elin, it was a contribution to her ultimate good. Likewise, when God allows evil to come out in our choices, he is allowing us to expose our hearts to the light of day. Hopefully that causes us to realize our need for grace and mercy - a sinner's ultimate good. The absence of pain and expressed evil in a fallen world would not contribute to our ultimate good, but rather to our damnation - as

we moved through the world never recognizing our need to be saved. God's saving of an individual from pain would be a temporary salvation, not an everlasting one.

**5) I purposed the event and weighed the consequences, but was not guilty of evil against Atticus or Elin** - When we make choices, we must do so based on our best understanding of all the circumstances. In a similar situation to the movie "[The Bridge](#)," if I see a child playing on a draw bridge, and see the draw bridge lowering towards his imminent demise, I will stop the lowering of that draw bridge. However, if I add the information that a trolley full of people is coming along that draw bridge and will certainly crash if the bridge is not lowered, then it seems most right that I allow the bridge to close. My choice to abstain from saving the child is not wrong or evil in this situation, though were the greater good of the trolley not present, my abstention would be wrong.

So when we allowed the situation with Elin and Atticus to play out, with the limited amount of knowledge we had, I do not believe we wronged either. Elin has to learn to play nice. She must learn to live in peace with her brother. For Atticus's health, we must figure out if his crying fits are dangerous. All of those are goods that we desire to come about. When we allowed the situation to play out, then, it wasn't an evil of abstention where we should have intervened for some greater good. I believe that a greater good was served by allowing Elin's free choice to be made, and for Atticus to experience his crying fit in a relatively safe and controlled environment. Elin wronged Atticus, not us. Though we could have prevented it, that prevention could have led to a greater evil down the road (e.g. Elin not learning a lesson and causing a harmful crying fit in a less controlled environment).

How much more is this true of an omniscient and omnipotent God? The evil that we experience is horrendous. But only God knows all the inter-workings of his creation and how to bring the greatest good about ([Ravi has a great video about this](#)). How are we to blame God for the evil that others commit against us, or the evils and pains that are the only indicator to most that something is wrong with them and the world, and confronts them with their need of a savior?

Evil and pain are almost impossible to deal with, especially when we are in the midst of experiencing them. That is exactly why we have to think logically about our worldview beforehand. When we do, it becomes clear that Christianity provides the best basis on which to take evil as seriously as it should be taken. Christianity also discourages our attempts to eradicate the "specks" of evil we find

in others, as we have our own "logs" to worry about. Orthodox, accurate Christianity undercuts self-righteousness and vindictiveness against others who are "out there", and proclaims that the true need for redemption begins from the inside out. Beyond catering to our emotional intuitions about evil, and beyond providing us with the strongest possible basis for love, respect, and humility, what I believe is the appropriate view of God and evil gives us the greatest hope through our trials. We can be comforted in knowing that while the world is not as it should be, and we are greatly wronged by others, that somehow, God in his inconceivable omniscience and omnipotence, is purposefully working through those actions for our greatest good. Hope, love, and purpose - three things you won't find as a coherent trinity in any other worldview. As you find yourself working in a fallen world, with fallen people, be comforted in knowing that all things will be made right, and God is even now ensuring that ultimate good is being worked on through and in your very circumstances.



## Appendix 7.2: Piercing the Darkness

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/piercing-the-darkness>

If we had lived our whole lives in a world devoid of sharp objects, what would we think if we were to see a blade for the first time? As our hand examined it and we cut ourselves, our initial tendency may be to surmise that the maker of this object was malicious, for the effects of her creation are certainly evil. But what a faulty conclusion this would be if the maker of this blade had intended for it to be used to cut down trees in order to build comfortable dwellings, or a blade to harvest wheat for the many wonderful feasts she held. While the knife could certainly cut and kill, the sharpness of the blade would say nothing about how it is to be wielded. As we came to know more about the maker of the blade, we might eventually arrive at the conclusion that the maker was fond of precision and balance in order that the wielder might extend his life through its use. But our initial experience with the blade was that it had cut us. The mishandling of this well-made blade may lead to pain - or even death.

Likewise, God, the giver of choice, has a passion for truth and love, in order that the wielder may extend their joy and their life. Truth and love are the balances of a very sharp blade we call choice. That many choices enacted bring about pain and death in our world don't necessarily say anything about the creator of choice - just as our injury by a blade mishandled says nothing of the blade's creator. Choice is a gift from God that is beautiful when used within its intended purposes - to build and edify community. But it is abhorrent when it is enacted devoid of truth and love.

Were selfish and malicious choices - choices mis-wielded - not to receive the natural consequences of pain and death, only then could we truly say that a loving God was malicious. For without consequences against those who mis-wield choice, all would be trapped in a terrible world of unimaginable solitude, devoid of community. We would all be islands unto ourselves. The pain that results from the mishandling of choice is not merely judgment - though often it is indeed judgment. It is also mercy. As the vomiting from an inebriated's gut may be enough to turn the drunkard away from too much drink, so the pain from a choice that has ostracized and maligned others may be just enough to draw one away from their lonely, self-centered universe and into closer community.

Natural evil, likewise, shows us a better way. The pain we experience from tornadoes, earthquakes, storms, and accidents is no less painful than that

experienced from human malice. This pain is often not a direct result of evil choices modern humanity has made. It is a curse of God from the Fall. But again, natural evil, though a curse, is also a mercy to fallen humanity. The sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden was not simply the eating of forbidden fruit, but choosing such in order to set himself up as God. Adam's sin was self-centeredness, and it is from this sin that all other sins are birthed. The Bible's first observation of Adam's fallenness was his desire to clothe himself, as he had for the first time in his life looked fully inward instead of fully outward. No longer was Adam's only concern for Eve, nature, and God, but it was rather a concern for himself. Natural evil, then, is a reminder that the world is against us. Were the world to be for us, as it once was, it would only serve to entrench the core notion of sin in us which tells us that we are God and that all should bow to us. Nature now requires our sacrifice, a perpetual reminder that we are not God.

Our world is filled with sharp edges upon which we frequently fall. The blood we spill often causes us to question what sort of creator would fashion such a world, and how such a harsh world could be a benevolent blessing. First and foremost, the Christian worldview acknowledges that evil truly exists and that the world is not as it should be. Pain and evil are not fabrications, illusions, or non-existent. They are real. While most other ideologies have no objective grounds for saying the world "should" be otherwise, Christianity grounds such language in a purposeful creation by a benevolent God. The Christian answer to pain and evil, then, is to seek life as it was intended by its creator. True joy and fulfillment comes from a relationship with the creator God, recognizing him as the sovereign of all things, and living in self-sacrificial community. Not only does God intend for us to live this way, but he demonstrated such a life himself through Jesus Christ, who submitted to the "foolish" means of God - pain and death at the hands of evil men - for the good of others. Our harsh world, then, blesses us with the ever present reminder that we are not God, and that only something outside ourselves can fix what is wrong. This harsh world is not as such because God seeks our blood, an oblation for our attempt to usurp his throne. Rather, it is intended to depict to us our mortality and point us to that which is beyond ourselves - the true God.

As humanity continues to fall upon the sharp blade of choice wielded inappropriately, we would do well to recognize that the ensuing pain is in a strange sense, a wonderful mercy of God. Pain can undercut the deeply entrenched notions in each of us that we are gods, and point us to the one who truly is. But we would also do well to recognize that the power of choice can be wielded for unimaginable good. As we choose to obey God, love our enemies, lay down our lives, and refuse to bow the knee to the powers and institutions of this world, we will find that the



pain and darkness of this world are subdued. The wonderful blade of choice which God has given us is able to pierce the darkness. Our choice to remove ourselves from the fictitious pantheon and bow the knee to the true God's means will change the world. As we wield our choices of worship, humility, love, service, and submission, God will conquer evil, push back the darkness, and circumcise even the hardest of hearts - our own.

## Appendix 7.3: The Problem of Joy

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/the-problem-of-joy>

### ***DADDY, I'M SCARED TO GO TO THE BEACH. WHAT IF THERE IS LIGHTNING AGAIN?***

I assured Elin that she could trust me and that I wouldn't purposefully take us into danger. As we continued our preparations to walk down to the beach, she didn't seem too reassured. She had honed in on the danger of lightning.

### ***BUT DADDY, IF THERE WAS LIGHTNING, YOU WOULD PROTECT ME, RIGHT?***

While her faith in me was endearing, I had to break the news to her that I couldn't protect her from lightning if it struck. In fact, if I held her hand like she wanted, that would only allow the lightning to strike us both. I just wasn't powerful enough to stop lightning. Elin thought for a minute, then asked another question. She didn't ask it in a genuinely inquiring way. She already knew the answer to her question - but the answer she was coming up with didn't comport with what she had been taught.

### ***WOULDN'T GOD PROTECT ME?***

Elin knew that people were sometimes struck and killed by lightning. But Elin also knew the children's catechism, which tells us that God loves us and takes care of us, that he is everywhere, and that he can do all things. But those truths obviously didn't comport. She was beginning to deal with the problem of evil.

Catalina and I led Elin through a lengthy discussion. We used the catechism and other truths she had learned to help guide her. If we got struck by lightning and died, what would happen to us? Well, our souls would enter God's presence. Elin is a dualist and knows that we are more than just our bodies. Would God ever let anything bad happen to the souls of those who love him? No! So while God may choose not to protect our physical bodies from lightning in a particular moment, he would certainly preserve our souls, and he would one day resurrect our bodies. Plus, the Bible promises that, since God loves us, he will make all things work out to be good for us in some way, even when we can't figure out

how. We tried to explain a temporal ill in light of an ultimate good. God may allow bad events to occur, but he would never allow an ultimate evil to befall us.

We were thankful for the wonderful discussion we could have with Elin. How many parents get to have such a deep conversation with their four year old? We savored the once in a lifetime opportunity to answer such a thoughtful question. Then the next day came.

### ***DADDY, WHY IS GOD SENDING ANOTHER STORM? WHY IS HE RUINING EVERYONE'S FUN?***

Elin asked me this question as we started packing up our stuff to move indoors off the beach. It had stormed every day of our vacation. Elin recognized that God controlled the weather, and she knew from her own experience as well as looking out at all the other beachgoers that God's storm would ruin the fun of everyone present. God seemed like a killjoy. I asked her if she thought God was mean for sending a storm, or if she thought we were mean parents when we limited her desserts or her screen time. She answered in the affirmative.

I explained that as parents, we aren't only focused on the immediate enjoyment of something. We limit things like desserts and screentime not because we want to stop fun, but because we understand that there are long-term consequences for our actions. I said that we are God's children, and it is the same with us. Catalina asked Elin why rain was important and what other benefits come from the rain. We talked about drinking water for us and animals, how plants need water to grow, how the fish in the oceans need water, etc. We talked about how God's sending of rain wasn't intended to stymie our enjoyment, but it was actually for our long-term good and is his way of taking care of other people, animals, and things. We encouraged her to not just focus on herself in the question but look to the good of the broader world around her. While I'm sure Elin still feels that God and her parents are mean when they interrupt her fun, I hope her spirit was able to start to receive the truths we discussed.

### **The Problem of Evil**

Without knowing it, Elin was thinking through the problem of evil. How can God be good if he allows bad things to happen? If God controls things like the

weather, does that mean when the weather harms someone, God is guilty of evil? I think our question-led discussion with Elin was age appropriate and sufficient, but it got me thinking a bit deeper about the problem of evil. There are logical responses to the problem of evil - the answers we lead Elin to, as well as others. [Human choice is a large component of evil](#). Abel was killed by the hand of Cain. Understanding that [consequences and pain are in one small sense a mercy](#) which reminds us that we are not god and points us to the one who is can also be helpful. Nebuchadnezzar discovered this mercy when he worshipped God - but only after being stricken with insanity. And trusting in God's justice - knowing that [the evil God does allow is for the ultimate good](#) of those who love him - is vital. We see this in Joseph's enduring of slavery and imprisonment in order to sustain his family - the family which would eventually produce the savior of the universe. And this savior of the universe would also submit to humanity's evil choices and the allowance of evil by God. He did this so that we would ultimately be freed from evil altogether.

I talked a bit about the problem of evil in [our last newsletter](#). I found it interesting that the conversations I have with non-believers and struggling Christians almost always revolve around this problem of evil. Unfortunately, no amount of logical explanation seems to unseat the hold of doubt that the problem of evil has formed in their minds. Even the strongest [theodicy](#) just won't do. I believe this is because the problem of evil for most people isn't an intellectual problem, but rather an experiential one. Just like Elin can hear and understand my reasoning for why she can't have more dessert or more screentime - yet still think I'm mean - so it is with those who hear explanations for the problem of evil. Reasons don't matter all that much. What matters is one's current experience.

So what should be the Christian response to evil? While I think there is a very important place for intellectual endeavors, and I have great Christian thinkers like [Alvin Plantinga](#) to thank for using intellectual arguments which have helped me remain a Christian, I believe the main Christian response to evil must be experience rather than argumentation. Of course a part of this means creating a positive experience for those who are struggling with evil. We must listen, be an open community which those in pain can enter, we must love, and we must serve. But stopping there would be letting ourselves off the hook. We would merely be

working with those in pain rather than entering into it ourselves. Even the world does this. The world responds to disasters, the plight of refugees and immigrants, and other humanitarian crises. The world deals with the experience of evil that others have. Christianity may be positioned to help with greater depth and frequency, but especially in an age of humanism, humanitarians abound. But there is one experience Christianity can display which the world cannot. We can fight the problem of evil with the problem of joy.

### **The Problem of Joy**

Christianity is uniquely positioned to answer the problem of evil. It's one of the few systems which can acknowledge with internal consistency that the problem exists in the first place. Many Eastern religions would view evil as an illusion, while materialistic thought cannot produce the prescriptive backing to call something evil. Whereas on Christianity a child's murder is evil in its breaking of God's standard, to many Eastern adherents such evil is illusory, and to the materialist it can only be described as an action which our mechanistic synapses don't prefer, and it is an action which isn't good for the survival of humanity. Only on monotheism do we have "oughtness," an obligation to some standard outside of ourselves. Only on monotheism does evil truly exist.

But Christianity also provides us with a counter-experience to evil which can't be produced in either Eastern thought or materialism. It provides us with the ability to experience joy through any and all circumstances. James explicitly tells us that we should have joy when we experience trials. We are constantly told to be content and joyful, regardless of our circumstances, in light of God's good will and grace towards us. We not only see these ideas and commands on the pages of scripture, but we see this joy lived out in the lives of the apostles and early Christian martyrs who faced imprisonment, torture, and execution with joy. This joy is central to Christianity, as it was also a central experience of our savior. Jesus, our great high priest who was tempted in all ways that we are, chose to endure the cross "for the joy that was set before him."

This joy that Christians are to have is not a naive joy. Christ's drops of blood, his agonizing groans, and his pleas to God as he faced the cross are testament enough of this. Christian joy is not borne lightly. Christian joy is not a joy which

ignores the existence of evil, like Eastern thought. It doesn't reduce our experience of evil to randomness, or another's evil actions against us as merely alternative evolutionary preferences. Evil is real and ought not to be. God is good and wants his world to be restored. Whatever evil we experience now, we truly do experience. Yet we can find joy in knowing that our God is in control, our God seeks our good, our God has reached out towards us for restoration, and our God personally understands what we are going through because he himself has endured evil. We can find joy in the purposes of God, the empathy of God, the sovereignty of God, and the good we know is being produced right now in us through the trials we face. We can endure with joy because we are in relationship with our God right now. It is this relationship which produces joy within us. Just as I hope Elin can one day find joy in obedience to me, trusting in me and knowing that my actions towards her are not intended to malign her, so I think it should be with our Father in Heaven. We may not know why God does what he does. We may not know how he will bring about our good. But *we know God*.

It is also important to understand that Christian joy is not necessarily an outward exuberance or a lack of mourning. While our joy may be expressed in elation at times, it may also be overshadowed by the legitimate expression of sorrow. Nevertheless, we do not mourn as those who have no hope, for we have a risen savior. Even our mourning has at its core an inexplicable joy. While those in Eastern religions bide their time in the illusion of this life, awaiting the loss of self when they are joined with the one, and while materialists work hard to avoid trials and enjoy pleasures now, neither of these systems can provide us with a joy through current trials. Only Christianity can do that.

Our job as Christians, then, is to live a life of contentment and joy. Yes, we are to love others well when they experience evil. But that's easy to do in comparison to personally experiencing and displaying joy when we ourselves come face to face with evil. Nobody wants to listen to a Christian who has arguments about God without any experience of him. Our job as Christians is to know God - to experience Him. That experience will undoubtedly show forth in our lives and will be unmistakable to those who see our display of the joy only a living God could produce within us.

So how can you believe in a God when so much evil exists in the world? I can give you a number of answers to the problem of evil. But can you explain how true joy could exist in the face of evil apart from God? Can you answer the problem of joy? Christians, join together and defeat the problem of evil by embodying the problem of joy.

## Appendix 8: The Unspoken

Every day, many words we say,  
But even more are left unspoken.  
Some filled with hate, some with love so great,  
And some we feel are just too open.  
But at the end of the day, when these words go away,  
Where is it that they all go?  
The words unwise, to Heaven do rise,  
The good descend to Hell below

The words in our minds from malicious design  
Are never intended to be uttered.  
And anger that feeds language from hateful seeds  
Should never water those of another.  
So all of these words that remain unheard  
Because of a tame tongue that has left them unspoken,  
Rise without blame, escaping the flames,  
To live forever, redeemed, unbroken.

But all of the words filled with love and concern,  
Left unsaid, leave an empty heart.  
For who can live with the thought of investing in naught  
Except temporary pride, that did silence impart?  
And at the end of the day when these words go away  
And the opportunity for love we did spurn,  
We'll think back to our silence, wish for another chance,  
And forever the unspoken will burn.



## Appendix 9: Some End or Some One?

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/some-end-or-some-one>

The story of "The Prodigal Son" is a seemingly familiar story for most of us. However, as our men's group goes through this story again, guided by Tim Keller's book, "The Prodigal God," I am finding it more beautiful and convicting than ever before. In the first place, simply reading this story in Romanian has illuminated the passage. In our culture, the notion of "prodigal" has always (at least in my mind) meant "wayward." A prodigal is someone who has lost their way. However, in Romanian, the story is of the "wasteful" son. That makes sense, as the son wasted the love of his family and his full inheritance on that which was fleeting and meaningless.

This revised understanding of the meaning of "prodigal" opens up Keller's book title as well, as we understand that Keller wants to clue us in to the "wastefulness" of God. At first this notion perhaps comes across as blasphemous. But as Keller expounds on the story of the Prodigal Son, highlighting Christ's audience, Christ's character, and the overly generous love of the father, it becomes clear that God is "wasteful" in his love, at least in the eyes of the world. The Pharisees couldn't understand how Jesus wasted his love and attention on the sinners and tax collectors. Such a message is just as important for us today, as we likewise hoard the love and forgiveness of God which we believe we have obtained through our merit, refusing to dispense any of it to those who we perceive to be less than us.

As our men's group discussed the most recent chapter in our book study, I had the opportunity to share a little bit of my personal testimony and explained how God had transformed my life. I mentioned in my testimony that I used to be a "good Christian," and I used to give to and serve others - but only those who I thought deserved love and service. I was the older brother from the parable, a Pharisee at heart. When I explained that my former giving habits had been based on merit, one of the group members spoke up and asked what was wrong with that. Isn't giving at all a good thing? And if you do give, why would you give to those who don't merit it? That sparked a great discussion and it really got me thinking about who we choose to show grace to and how we go about giving

generously.

After thinking about the question for a bit, I concluded that there is a slim middle ground for giving like God. If one is licentious, they won't be giving freely for the sake of others. The younger brother in the story of the "Prodigal Son" gave of his money to others, but only as a means for obtaining his own pleasure and fulfillment. Though he gave, his giving was empty, as both his enjoyment and the enjoyment of his benefactors disappeared when his wealth was spent. These relationships were empty and meaningless and dissipated as quickly as they had been formed.

But giving of oneself from the other end of the spectrum isn't better. When one gives as an older brother, they are giving from a position of merit. They don't give freely, but rather give to those whom they deem worthy of their charity. In that sense, charity is no longer charity, but meritorious earnings. In this way, a moralist's giving is fraught with similar emptiness as the giving of one who is licentious. Relationships are just as meaningless on a moralistic system, as seen in the older brother's willingness to leave his younger brother stranded, without a home, and without forgiveness. To a moralist, brotherhood means nothing if your brother doesn't merit your help. Likewise, the older brother's personal enjoyment was tied to his system of merit. He could enjoy his position in the father's household so long as he was able to understand that his hard work and merit warranted his sonship and his inheritance. But when he saw the father forgive the undeserving younger brother, the older brother's world came crashing down and he could no longer enjoy his sonship. He recognized that all his hard work and persistence - the very actions which allowed him to value himself and assure his high standing - meant very little to his father. What was meaningful to the older brother was not the status of sonship or the love of the father, but his own good deeds.

In light of this juxtaposition between the emptiness of giving in a licentious system versus a moralistic system, I want to explore what it means to give rightly - to give in a Christ-based system.

**Those Like Us:**

In the mid-1900's, as schools began to desegregate in the United States, a phenomenon known as white flight began. In the eyes of many in the white majority, schools became "corrupted" by minorities, so the wealthier families, usually white, fled to the suburbs. In the suburbs, middle class and wealthy white folk surrounded themselves with those who were just like them.

It's easy to look back at our ancestors and critique them for their brazen racism, though we do the same as them today. We do it with our gated communities, our move to better school districts, the places we choose to visit or avoid, our homeschooling, and our Christian schooling. Unfortunately, we even do this with our churches. As Martin Luther King Jr. I believe rightly stated, Sunday mornings at 11 are the most segregated hour in America. We form our lives around those who are like us, in almost every aspect we can control. We constantly move up to live with better people - people like us - leaving the others behind or outside. We surround ourselves with people who are just like us. Now perhaps some of us have good reasons for doing what we do. Maybe some of us live with those like us, but make incursions into the lives of others in need. However, I've come to find that quite often our mercy, like our communities, is an indicator of where our hearts usually lie. If we are only or mostly loving people who are just like us, we likely have some glaring deficiencies in our understanding and administration of love and grace.

Take for example two different cases with which I was involved on my church's diaconate. One individual was a white man from our church who I didn't know very well. He was having significant marital and financial struggles. The financial struggles were so significant that the diaconate was looking at helping him with his mortgage for a time. The other case was a poor, single (divorced), minority woman with children who was living in some dilapidated apartment complex, and was coming to the church for help with rent.

My feelings for the man throughout our assistance were empathetic. As a Christian, church-going, married man who could be capsized by unemployment, marital issues, or a health problem at any time, I understood this man's plight. I didn't really question who was at fault in the marital issues, why there was such a significant financial dilemma, etc. This man was like me. I would want to be

helped - and I may even say I would deserve help - were I to be in a position like his. And as we helped this man, I approved of him in large part because I (unknowingly) ascribed my merit to him.

In the case of the woman, however, I held many reservations. Why was she divorced? How many times was she divorced? Did she have kids before her husband, with her husband, or after her husband? Were all the kids from the same man? If she is in such a bad situation, what did she do to get herself there? She doesn't go to our church and isn't churchgoing, so why is she coming to the church for help? Is she just trying to use us? I know the type of people who come out of those apartment complexes (I taught many students from there). Many were "riff raff." Would helping her just perpetuate her situation? Would helping her make her send a hundred of her friends knocking on our door because we were now an easy target? The lady drove to our church in a nice truck. If she could afford a truck why was she coming to us for help? And the list could go on. Every possible negative scenario was played through in my mind as we considered helping this woman. This woman was not like me, and therefore it was hard for me to help her because, although I didn't know it then, my grace and assistance were based on merit and my own perception of self-righteousness.

The first sign that we view grace as meritorious is that we choose to surround ourselves, help, and withhold judgment on those who are like us (or those with whom we identify). Many men immediately side with other men when accusations of sexual assault arise. Republicans side with Republicans and Democrats with Democrats on various allegations and issues related to their own parties. Whites immediately side with other whites accused of racism. Time and time again we see that we are self-interested creatures who hedge our wellbeing with our own merit, and therefore prop up those who hold the same basis for merit that we do. But true grace and love - the grace and love which flow from the cross - knows no bounds. They are not proud or self-seeking. *True grace and love seek out and hear the lost, the sinners, those least like us, and those on the fringes of society.*

### **Us Like Those:**

Every time we exit a grocery store here in Romania, we are greeted by small,

dirty, beggar children. We used to withhold giving from these children, as we had always been taught that such generosity would only enable them and perpetuate their physical poverty - though nobody ever warned us that a continual failure to give would also work to harden us and perpetuate our spiritual poverty. After a short time of withholding our generosity, we realized that for our own hearts, and the hearts of our children, we needed to give. We didn't give much, just a loaf of bread, milk, or some eggs. But we gave.

The small gifts we gave to these children weren't life changing for them. In fact, they probably weren't that meaningful at all. Even if we had given them \$100, while I'm sure their excitement would have been piqued, I don't know that this money would have meant that much to them. It is just money. It would be used up within the day, its meaning as fickle as the consumable and finite material goods it was used to purchase. This is the very thing we see happen with impoverished communities and individuals who have the government or NGO's lavish them with much needed food and materials. Free goods - while helpful and important - lack long-term meaning. Material goods are a start, and James would even argue a necessity. But they're not the ends.

If meeting someone's needs isn't lasting, if providing them with food or housing only scratches the surface of their needs, then what is it that gets at the heart? What is it that brings about change? I think the Bible is extremely clear on this answer. One major way true change is brought about is through incarnational living. The whole book of Hebrews emphasizes this fact - the fact that we can trust God, worship him, have access to him, be bold with him, and relate with him because he lived as one of us. The law which God provided in the Old Testament was vital for Israel to learn about equality and generosity, but it was insufficient to change the heart. The manna God provided in the desert was food for the day, but it wasn't the bread of life or living water. We needed God in the flesh to dwell among us, and so he condescended to us through the incarnation.

What's a good enough method for God to employ should certainly be good enough for us. As God recognized the importance of relationship and condescension through incarnation, so we should recognize this as well. Giving a homeless person some money or some food is kind, but inviting them to dinner at

your house or in a restaurant is powerful. One experience fulfills a bodily need with temporary satisfaction, and the other satisfies a relational need while creating a memory which is lasting and a bond which can be built upon. Your willingness to associate with, be in proximity to, and treat as equal those who are "lesser" than you has the power to transform lives. It may not always transform and it may not usually transform, but it is this incarnation which embodies the gospel to those we serve. Just consider Paul's words in Philippians 2 and dwell on Christ's beautiful sacrifice.

***3 DO NOTHING FROM SELFISH AMBITION OR CONCEIT, BUT IN HUMILITY COUNT OTHERS MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN YOURSELVES. 4 LET EACH OF YOU LOOK NOT ONLY TO HIS OWN INTERESTS, BUT ALSO TO THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS. 5 HAVE THIS MIND AMONG YOURSELVES, WHICH IS YOURS IN CHRIST JESUS, 6 WHO, THOUGH HE WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD, DID NOT COUNT EQUALITY WITH GOD A THING TO BE GRASPED, 7 BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF, BY TAKING THE FORM OF A SERVANT, BEING BORN IN THE LIKENESS OF MEN. 8 AND BEING FOUND IN HUMAN FORM, HE HUMBLER HIMSELF BY BECOMING OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH, EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS. 9 THEREFORE GOD HAS HIGHLY EXALTED HIM AND BESTOWED ON HIM THE NAME THAT IS ABOVE EVERY NAME, 10 SO THAT AT THE NAME OF JESUS EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH AND UNDER THE EARTH, 11 AND EVERY TONGUE CONFESS THAT JESUS CHRIST IS LORD, TO THE GLORY OF GOD THE FATHER.***

Jesus Christ left the perfection of his dwelling in the presence of God, the beloved Father with whom Jesus had been in direct relation from eternity past. Not only did he give up the presence of his Father, but he traded it for a dirty stable, where he became the son of poor, young parents. He gave up his authority and chose to submit not only to his Father's will towards suffering and apparent defeat, but he did so while also in submission to all sorts of human authorities and institutions. Jesus, the creator of all that existed (Jn. 1), was willing to be subjected to pain, mockery, torture, and death by the very creatures he created, by the very creatures he came to serve, and by right, the very creatures he had authority over. Lest you think such condescension and incarnation are only methods God

should employ, hear Paul when he tells us that we are to do likewise as we consider others more significant than ourselves. *Incarnation and submission to those who are "lesser" is not only what God uses to save and change our hearts, it's also a mark of His work which He develops in our lives and uses to exalt Christ and glorify His name.*

### **Always With Love:**

Sadly, it is possible to recognize the first two aspects of true generosity and servanthood without embracing the ultimate requirement for meaningful service - love. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says,

**1 IF I SPEAK IN THE TONGUES OF MEN AND OF ANGELS, BUT HAVE NOT LOVE, I AM A NOISY GONG OR A CLANGING CYMBAL. 2 AND IF I HAVE PROPHETIC POWERS, AND UNDERSTAND ALL MYSTERIES AND ALL KNOWLEDGE, AND IF I HAVE ALL FAITH, SO AS TO REMOVE MOUNTAINS, BUT HAVE NOT LOVE, I AM NOTHING. 3 IF I GIVE AWAY ALL I HAVE, AND IF I DELIVER UP MY BODY TO BE BURNED, BUT HAVE NOT LOVE, I GAIN NOTHING.**

Imagine that. If I give everything away and submit to torment and death, yet do this without love, then my actions are meaningless. If I spend my whole life serving those who are unlike me, and if I spend my whole life living incarnationally towards others, it's all meaningless if I do it without love. But why does love matter? Why can't I just give and serve out of obligation to God?

Love is what truly changes a heart, and a heart which has been inwardly changed by God's love will likewise love outwardly. Yes, I argued earlier that incarnation and living amongst others is vital for change, but this must be done with love. Incarnation is simply the mode or medium with which love is transported best. It's easy to live amongst others and despise them. In fact, they warn missionaries about this all the time! Many missionaries have a tendency to serve in close proximity to nationals, yet at a distance, as they continue living in the culture but despising the foreign people and their foreign ways of life. But condescension without love is just condescending. While incarnation is vital, love is central. I John 4 is all about the importance of love, both as an evidence of a heart which

has truly been changed by God, and as the tool God uses to change hearts. I John 4 says,

***19 WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US. 20 IF ANYONE SAYS, "I LOVE GOD," AND HATES HIS BROTHER, HE IS A LIAR; FOR HE WHO DOES NOT LOVE HIS BROTHER WHOM HE HAS SEEN CANNOT LOVE GOD WHOM HE HAS NOT SEEN. 21 AND THIS COMMANDMENT WE HAVE FROM HIM: WHOEVER LOVES GOD MUST ALSO LOVE HIS BROTHER.***

Love is the fingerprint of God in our lives. In a world as corrupted as ours, and in hearts as dark as those which reside within humanity, the only tangible evidence of a God powerful enough to break through evil and hate is love. I'm not talking about the feeling of love. I mean true, self-sacrificial, unmerited, unconditional, Christ-like, enemy love. The heavens may declare God's glory, but darkened hearts will never see this. Paul tells us as much in the first chapter of Romans. The gospel message may be the wisdom of God to those of us who are being saved, but it is foolishness to those living under the darkness of sin. But love - love is the sledgehammer God used to break into the world and shatter our hearts of stone, and it is the velvet glove God uses to fashion all the pieces back together as a heart of flesh. Only love can loose the bonds of delusion and hatred, even in those who are at enmity with God. We Christians should understand this well, as this is the very thing God did for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ loved us through his death. For this reason we are commanded to love not only our neighbors, but our enemies. God knows first-hand that love is powerful enough to overcome enmity. And rather than just commanding us to love the unlovely, God demonstrated it through Christ Jesus. The truth of powerful, enemy-love should be a truth we Christians display frequently, as a life truly touched by the love of Christ will be a life that looks more and more like Christ's each day.

Upon reflection of this point, that love is the crux of all meaningful action, it always amuses me that the world - and even most of us Christians - scoff at generous love directed towards the lowly and undeserving. I know that most days I am such a scoffer. We often view such gifts of generous love as throwing pearls before swine. Enemy love and loving the hopeless is an empty, frivolous pursuit. Why help the poor if they just misuse what we give them? Well, have we ever



given to them within a loving, incarnational relationship? Should we expect the poor to change when we just throw material goods at them? Or do shallow, finite, material goods alone simply produce shallow, temporary, materialistic responses? And beyond the desire for others to change, we Christians seem to be largely concerned with the pragmatic side of love - the transformational aspect which can change others. But when we are using love as a tool to accomplish some objective in people, aren't we objectifying people? Is love, love, when its goal is some end and not someone? We are so concerned with "wasted love," as if loving another human being simply because they're human is a waste. We remain overly concerned about what others will do with what we give while failing to consider what we are doing with what we've been given.

Such a focus on expectations - on the speck in another's eye - doesn't seem to be love-infused giving at all. In fact, it seems antithetical to biblical notions of giving. When we see justice and mercy meted out through generosity in the Bible, we aren't usually incentivized to implement these things because they are great tools we can use to change others or fix the world, though such things certainly can change and fix. Even Jesus said that the poor would always be with us, and even he doesn't seem so idealistic as to think that generosity will conquer poverty. Rather than a tool to work on others, biblical giving is often viewed as a tool God uses to shape the hearts of the giver, and is a general measure of our own spiritual health. For where our treasures are, there are our hearts also. Only after our hearts learn love through generous giving will our giving in generosity become steeped in true love. The horse must come before the cart. Unfortunately, we Christians usually get generosity backwards. We view it as an ineffective tool to change others rather than a necessary tool God calls us to use to first change ourselves. *The irony of our view on giving is that were we to have a biblical understanding of love and unmeritorious giving - the kind of giving God extends to us - our hearts would be transformed and our gifts would be accompanied with true, transformational, life-changing love rather than the result-oriented, pragmatic, expectation-infused action that actually undergirds our dysfunctional and ineffective "love."*

### **Conclusion:**

I would love to say that I am writing all this from a position of mastery. I would

love to declare that I am not a moralist who seeks my own kind. I would love to admit that I am a generous person who incarnates to all, and I am filled with love for others. Unfortunately, such is not the case. While God has worked a lot in my heart, and while I feel that I seek to be incarnational much more than I had before, these things are still difficult. I do feel that I seek those on the fringe more than before, and I truly do try to meet them where they are. However, love remains the most difficult aspect of generosity for me. That's unfortunate, since love is the only thing that can provide meaning to my generosity. We have undesirables into our home when many others do not. We eat with undesirables when many others do not. We go into the community of undesirables when many others don't. But I can't say I often do these things with a true love in my heart for those I am serving. People are so hard to love.

Fortunately, I do believe there is some light at the end of the tunnel. As we continue to help those who we don't really want to help, it draws us closer to God. We serve not always out of a love for the people we help (yet), but out of a love for God. And as we obey and love God, God is showing us more and more how great his love is for us. He is showing us the darkness of our hearts and how undesirable we must be to him. Yet he pursues us, he incarnated for us, and above all, he lavishes his love upon us daily. As Keller says, our God is a "prodigal" God. I know because he wastes his love on me. As we bask in God's unmerited love and reflect upon his incarnational sacrifice, we pray that God would grow our wasteful love as well. We pray that we would daily become more like God, and we pray that those we serve would eventually see his fingerprint in our lives and in our service. If the day ever comes that we exude true love to the unmeritorious - look out family, look out church, look out Romania, and look out world, for God is at work, and he is life-changing love.

*\*If you would like to read about some of the diaconal encounters which have helped to shape our understanding of mercy, you can find some of those stories [here](#).*

## Appendix 10: The High Road of Forgiveness

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/the-high-road-of-forgiveness>

What's the difference between a lost cause and a noble one? When does another chance turn into the last chance? If we're supposed to forgive someone seventy times seven, as Jesus said, how do we respond to the 491st offense? These are difficult questions all Christians must ask themselves. As I ruminated on such questions over the past few years, I was never able to arrive at a solid conclusion. In fact, I don't know many Christians who have nailed these issues down. Whether the answers are just too difficult to see, or our hearts too hard to accept the Christ-like answers we really know to be true, most of us, most of the time, seem to meander away from truth or certainty. In such a pragmatic society as ours, we are strangely content with labeling Christ's hardest exhortations, like those on forgiveness and mercy, as conundrums - gray areas we're happy to keep gray. Instead of working hard to discern God's Word and align our decisions with Christ's teachings, we instead tend to choose to be guided by our subjective, situational feelings rather than the objective truth our savior brought, and the tangible truth our savior lived out. Instead of embracing grace and forgiveness apart from merit, we all too often choose to forgive - or not, based on who has wronged us, how many times they have wronged us, or how severely they have wronged us. Our feelings are often the determinate standard for our actions, not God's decree.

As I have struggled with the light of Christ's teachings, the darkness of this world, and the place where this dark and light clash within my own heart, I think I have finally come to a conclusion about the issue of second chances - or 491st chances. My conclusion wasn't formed after deep, solitary contemplation. It didn't come from an extended personal Bible study. It didn't come from a profound discussion with my discipleship group. It didn't come to me after a week of fasting and prayer. It ultimately came from the questioning of someone looking in on Christianity from the outside. Christ's clear teaching on this subject doesn't require such deep searching. As Soren Kierkegaard said, "Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship...It is the church's prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close." It's easy enough for me to get around other

Christians and attempt to over-explain the Bible so we can get ourselves out of difficult applications. We often use scholarship and intellect to explain the Bible away rather than to explain it. Together, we Christians affirm each other in this notion that we just can't know how we should treat others. I mean, isn't it obvious that there are just some situations where someone can't be forgiven - where we aren't required to extend an open hand? Jesus used so many parables and metaphors, how can we really know what he meant when he speaks on forgiveness? In truth, labeling these parts of Christ's teachings which are difficult to live out as "conundrums" and "metaphors" makes it easy for me to ignore the lack of fruit I should be bearing on certain branches of my life. But when someone from outside the church asks me about seemingly clear teachings of Christ, I need to have an answer. And that's exactly what happened on this issue of forgiveness and mercy. I was forced by an unbeliever to come face to face with Christ.

A few weeks ago, I was able to share the [story of \\*Alexa](#) with my Romanian tutor. I told her our whole history. My tutor acknowledged that it would be hard enough for her to accept a Roma person, like Alexa, into her house at all, let alone forgive her for stealing. In fact, my tutor couldn't believe that anyone - Roma or not - deserved a second chance for so egregiously breaking our trust like Alexa did when she stole our credit card. That led us into the typical, but important discussion about the gospel, how we ought to forgive because we've been forgiven, and the magnitude of God's continued grace towards us. While our discussion dealt a little with the notion of [inflationary grace](#) brought up earlier this year in our men's Bible study, my tutor's questioning centered more around the worthiness of the object of forgiveness rather than the immensity of God's forgiveness. Why did Alexa deserve another chance? Why was it good to forgive a person like her? Wouldn't we be justified in cutting her off for her egregious offense? She and her community will never change, so wouldn't forgiveness be wasted on her? These questions weren't about the magnitude of grace, but about the worthiness of the recipient.

In our two weeks of prior discussions my tutor and I had broached all sorts of issues ranging from the priesthood of the believer to parenting. One of the issues we had discussed in depth was abortion, human value, and the image of God. I explained my stance on the issue and described the importance of recognizing the

intrinsic value of humanity. A human's value is intrinsic, meaning that wherever, whenever, and however a human presents themselves, they are made in the image of God. They have value. This value is located inside of each individual and follows them wherever they go, regardless. This is different from extrinsic value which only ascribes worth to an object based on some external qualifications. A baseball card without a scratch may be very valuable, but may become valueless if it is torn. The external characteristic of its physical appearance and condition can make or break its value. Human value, however, is not like the baseball card. Human value is not extrinsic, but intrinsic. No matter the deficiency, deformity, or characteristics of an individual, they are infinitely valuable.

Our previous discussion of intrinsic worth proved invaluable to our discussion on forgiveness. If humans are created in the image of God and are intrinsically valuable, then nothing they do can erase that value. The value follows them. This doesn't simply mean that one's race, social status, physical ability, or mental capacity is incapable of adding or detracting value from an individual. It also means that the external act of an individual's choice cannot add or detract from their value. In our case, it meant that Alexa's choice to betray our trust and steal from us in no way devalued her. If Alexa remained the same valuable human being after her sin as she was before her sin, then her worthiness to receive my love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness did not change either. A refusal to extend such things to someone who wrongs us is not choosing to enact justice. For Christians, choosing to forgive is not a neutral, amoral, personal preference which some Christians may choose to enact, while other Christians deny it. A refusal to show love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness to another image bearer of God is a denial of intrinsic human value. It makes human value dependent on something external to the individual. It denies that the image of God transcends characteristics, situations, and actions.

But something doesn't sit well with my assessment up to this point. Surely forgiveness and grace has its limits. Do we forgive a sex-offender and allow them to run our church nursery? Such a suggestion would seem obviously wrong, and I think that's because it is. But it's not a wrong sentiment because the notion of limitless forgiveness, grace, or intrinsic human value are wrong, but rather because we have conflated the idea of redeeming situations and redeeming

individuals. We have conflated trust with forgiveness. A sex-offender has shown that situations involving inferiors, children, etc are a problem for them. That's a serious issue. We don't want to put that individual in a situation where they have responsibility over children in our church nursery - because we don't want harm to come to our children, but also because we don't want our brother or sister in Christ to fall. True love seeks the protection of all parties. We cannot give a sex offender this position of trust. Likewise, when Alexa comes into our home, we likely won't allow her to move throughout our house without us tagging along close behind, at least for awhile. The external actions of individuals have consequences. An offense creates relational barriers, and also means that situations will be handled differently as we move forward. Barriers, stipulations, expectations, and restrictions don't necessarily mean that grace and forgiveness are not present. While we can certainly put up barriers which are too harsh, or refuse to deconstruct antiquated barriers because of our resentment and the harboring of a grudge, situational barriers are not inherently bad. They can simply be a legitimate, appropriate, necessary, loving response to a situation. We don't owe situations a second chance.

On the other hand, to refuse the extension of forgiveness, mercy, grace, and love to a sinner is inexcusable as a Christian. It's understandable, but not tenable. There are some scenarios in which I couldn't imagine how it would be possible for me to forgive someone, but by the grace of God. I am not at all taking the act of forgiveness lightly or minimizing the depth of reliance some will need to draw upon in order to forgive the most egregious sins against them. But my sentiments and empathy cannot possibly go deeper than those of the one who endured the greatest injustice - Jesus Christ. And his sentiments are that we trust in God, endure, and forgive. We first forgive because God has commanded us to do so, but we also forgive because of his example. Jesus Christ demonstrated what our forgiveness should look like, as he literally loved his enemies to death. Beyond God's command and example, foregoing forgiveness is also inexcusable in light of the immense mercy and grace we have personally received from our Savior. God not only tells us to forgive and shows us how to do it, but he extends this great gift to us. If we have truly experienced the generosity of God's forgiveness, then we should be changed in such a manner that we ourselves seek to forgive. Finally, forgiveness is important because it upholds the image of God. Failing to forgive

undermines the very notion we have of human value and the image of God as it deems another human being as unworthy of what we have received. Failing to forgive views others as being of lesser value based on the external factor of their actions.

Both the sex-offender and Alexa are worthy of our forgiveness and love because God commanded us to forgive, he forgave sinners as bad as them, he forgave me personally, and because they are made in the image of God. Their value cannot be lost in their actions, nor can it be regained. It is ever present. So while I may advocate for the sex-offender not running the church nursery, or I may have some restrictions for the friend who stole from me, I will forgive and love them. Forgiveness may look like inviting these sinners over for dinner. If restricting entrance to my home is an appropriate barrier for now, maybe I meet them somewhere for coffee instead of having them over for dinner. Maybe forgiveness means I should send them a card on their birthdays. Maybe it means I only meet them in the presence of a counselor. Maybe it means we retain weekly contact and a friendship, or maybe it means we only meet once to unload our burdens and forgive, parting company in love, and not pursuing a continued, deep relationship. Maybe it means I should avoid gossip about them at church and advocate for their inclusion in the church if they are repentant confessors. Barriers are important and vital, but far too often the barrier we choose to erect is the barrier of ostracization. When an offense reaches our particular threshold, we choose to cut others off. We choose a barrier that is no barrier to relationship at all, but rather a termination of relationship. That is not the forgiving attitude we are to have. Behind the last barrier - whether that barrier is as small as constant supervision while someone is in your house, or as large as the ability to only meet in the presence of a counselor outside the home - behind the final barrier must always be an open hand. It's a willingness to communicate and receive a confession of repentance. While it is totally appropriate and necessary for me to be wise in how I treat situations, there is no doubt in my mind about how I am to treat offenders - after the first offense or the 491st offense.

The best example I can give of this process is found in I Corinthians 5. In this passage we see that a member of the church is living in some very deep sin. Paul reprimands the church for allowing this man's sin to continue without erecting

relational barriers. Yet Paul is explicit that erection of barriers is not a cutting off of relationship. It is an action which looks to the restoration of the sinner - whether here on Earth or through God's preservation of his soul in the taking of his physical life. In fact, we eventually see the restoration of this individual in II Corinthians 2. In that passage, Paul tells the Corinthian church to ease up on the sinner. The barriers were sufficient and they now needed to seek restoration because the sinner was repentant. The barriers erected were not closed hands or the severing of relationship. There was always to be an open hand behind the last barrier.

Christ's teaching on forgiveness is hard. It's not hard in the sense that it's difficult to discern, but rather in the sense that it is difficult to enact. If Christ's extension of mercy towards us isn't obligation enough for us to extend the same mercy towards others, surely the teaching of the image of God is sufficient. We value all races, classes, the physically disadvantaged, and the unborn because we recognize that they are all human, and humans are made in God's image. Surely the same is true of those who are morally marred from their own choices. Surely it is the morally deformed who need something like mercy the most. And surely those of us who claim to have received infinite mercy can and should give to those in need that which amounts to an infinitesimal share of what we have ourselves received. To refuse mercy and forgiveness is not merely to deny another of a good, it is also a denial of our savior. It is to be the ungrateful debtor who had his debt forgiven, yet refused to forgive the small debt of another. It denies the greatness of our need of Christ and the magnitude of his work towards us. The mercy Jesus has extended towards us, could, like the bread and fishes, be divided up and given to the masses with basket-fulls of sustenance left over. We could give a share of our forgiveness to everyone in this world 491 times each and still be amazed at how abundant our savior's mercy was in our lives. Forgiveness isn't just a suggestion, it's a point of discipleship. It's a footprint of Jesus we are to follow, and will follow if we are His. It proves how great we think Christ's work is and how great we think our sin and need is. It proves what we think of the image of God in others and the true value of humanity.

Ultimately, Christ's teaching on forgiveness proves that we need Jesus, and that our only hope is in Him - for who could live up to such a high calling without Him?



While I don't want Christ's teaching on forgiveness to be true because it then demands that I follow it, my soul hopes with all hope that this teaching is indeed true, for Jesus has already forgiven me 490 times. If Christ forgave as most of us do, what hope would I have for tomorrow? While I could choose to continue propping up the common Christian notion that Christ's teachings are murky or metaphorical, I realize that my only hope is if His teachings really are true. While the truth of His teaching would make my life more difficult, and the depths of my sin even greater, it would also mean that I actually have hope in following Christ because there is forgiveness for my failings, not just for my 490th offense today, but for my 491st tomorrow.

## Appendix 11: The Powerful Love of the Powerless

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/the-sacrifice-of-true-love>

Most Christians, and those who live in "Christian societies" are familiar with the ten commandments. Don't steal, don't murder, don't covet, etcetera. But the ten commandments are just a small representation of the Bible's laws. You may not know that the Old Testament actually contains over 600 laws for the people of God to follow. In the New Testament, Jesus does us a favor and condenses all of the laws to two: love God and love your neighbor (Mt. 22:34-40). If we simply do those two things, then we'll never break any of the other 600 commandments. If we loved others, how could we murder them? If we loved, how could we covet what another has instead of being happy for them? If we loved God, how could we choose to avoid Him by not gathering together with other Christians to worship Him? **Love is absolutely central to the Bible and to followers of Christ.** In fact, Jesus tells us that it is a Christian's love which will distinguish them as a true follower of God (Jn. 13:35).

It's not just Jesus who thinks love is central to living rightly. The apostle John tell us that anyone who hates another, or anyone who does not love, does not know God, for love comes from God and will fill those who follow Him. We also see Paul tell us in first Corinthians 13 that whatever we do, if it is without love, is meaningless. If I give everything away to the poor, but do it without love, my action is empty. If I die for another or if I die for a cause I deem important, but do it without love, then my action was empty. I can live in "obedience," foregoing murder and adultery, but unless I forego hate and lust as well, my obedience is relatively unmeritorious. The impact any of my actions has on another's life, or in the world, does not validate any of my actions before God. The impact I have does not fulfill. Only love fulfills the law.

So love is important for Christians. **But what exactly is love?** While we could look at many definitions, I think it's most helpful to look at the world our loving God created, as it was originally intended to be. In the Garden of Eden, everyone was happy, everyone was nice, and everyone was provided for. But Genesis tells us that all this changed when Adam and Eve decided they wanted to be like God and define good and evil for themselves. Rather than trusting God's wisdom and benevolence, they looked to themselves for defining good. As I was growing up, I always thought the story of Adam and Eve was a bit strange - the talking snake and the seemingly trivial command to not eat a fruit. But one of the strangest aspects of the story has always been how Adam and Eve first reacted after sinning. Their

response wasn't to hide. It wasn't to run. It wasn't to fight. Instead of all the responses we would think make sense, their first response was to realize their nakedness. But as I am learning, often times it is where I think the Bible is most strange that I end up finding it to be most profound.

God placed Adam and Eve in a garden. To those living in the arid Middle East, the garden certainly symbolized abundance and provision. In the garden, nature provided everything Adam and Eve could ever need for sustenance. In the garden we also see that Adam and Eve walked with God. God provided for Adam and Eve and was in close relationship with them. Finally, we see, or at least infer, that Adam and Eve were likewise looking out for each other. Man will leave mother and father to care for and love his wife and Eve is specifically called a helper for Adam. All things in the garden were looking out for Adam and Eve's good - including Adam and Eve. Adam was always looking out for Eve and Eve was always looking out for Adam.

Sin, however, changed this. When Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, for the first time in their lives they looked inward. They looked to themselves rather than others. When Adam began looking to himself, Eve could no longer trust him to be looking out for her good. We see this explicitly when Adam blames her for their sin. Likewise, Eve was now looking out for herself and Adam could no longer trust her. We see this deterioration of relationships highlighted in the curses God gives as a result of sin. Adam and Eve will no longer be content with equality, and Adam would now seek to rule over Eve. No longer were husband and wife, man and woman, human and human looking out for the good of others. Likewise, God cursed nature. A nature which had once provided all that humanity needed would now be plagued by thorns and thistles. Humanity's relationship with nature was broken. And finally, God exiled Adam and Eve from the garden. Their relationship with God was broken. The garden where love had once prevailed, where all creation looked out for the wellbeing of others, was now destroyed by the inward focus of humanity. From that day forward, humanity would be characterized as a race ruled by self-interest.

The creation story shows us that love is a concern for, a focus on, and a service to others. Love's opposite is self-centeredness. But **if we live in a fallen world - if we live in a world where others are imperfect, sinful, and cruel - who is now deserving of our love?** Jesus tells us that we are to love our neighbors. Without knowing who your neighbors are, I'd probably say this teaching seems pretty obvious to most of us. For those of you with irritating neighbors, perhaps this particular command seems difficult enough. But Jesus shocks us when he declares

that we are not only to love those we consider our neighbors, but our enemies as well! In Matthew 5:43-48, Christ says,

**43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

Jesus destroys our typical notions of love by exposing the self-interest inherent in most of our definitions. We are ok with loving our neighbors because we know that we need to get along with our neighbors. If we love them, they hopefully won't cause problems for us. If we love them and give them things, they may repay us when we need something. But this self-focus is the opposite of love! Love is not love if we do it out of self-interest and if we only love those who will return our love. True love is an unconditional love - a love which extends even to our most hated enemies. We love our enemies not because they can or will do any good towards us, but because, as the Apostle Paul says, love "is not self-seeking" and love "keeps no record of wrongs."

So love is central to the Bible, love is others focused, and love is for everyone. But **how do we love in an imperfect world**? It would be easy to create a list of ways we can love, but love is not about lists of actions. This should especially make sense to those of you who are married. How loving would a marriage be if you asked your spouse for a list of actions which you'd obligatorily complete every day? *Take out the trash. Clean the toilet. Write me a love letter. Tell me that you love me before you leave for work. Kiss me at 6:03 PM.* If the only interaction we had with our spouses were obligatory, we'd have some serious problems. Such a relationship would be utterly empty because as Paul told us, love isn't mostly about actions, but rather it's about intentionality and motives. Are we seeking out others, to serve them for their own sake, or are we "loving" in order to gain something or to look good? Since I don't think any list of actions will help us, let's look at the best example of love in action. Philippians 2:3-8 shows us a wonderful picture of true love as God intended it, and as God himself demonstrates it.

**3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to**

the interests of the others. **5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:**

**6 Who, being in very nature God,**

**did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;**

**7 rather, he made himself nothing**

**by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.**

**8 And being found in appearance as a man,**

**he humbled himself**

**by becoming obedient to death--  
even death on a cross!**

Not only did Jesus give up the comfort of living in God's presence and his status of ruler, he made this sacrifice for us while we were his enemies living in sin and rebelling against God. He did this not for his own advantage, but in obedience and love towards God, and in loving sacrifice for us. Lest we think this was Christ's job as savior and primarily a Messianic role, Paul tells us that we are to mimic Christ in this very way. Notice all the relational language asking us to **lay down self-interest** and **take up the interest of others**. Paul says, **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.** We are to have the same mindset as Christ. Jesus shows us how to truly love - how God truly intended the world to be. He shows us that love is a decision we make which flows forth from a character of selflessness. While we are sinful humans with marred characters, God promises that when we choose to serve Him, He will begin making us more like Christ. As God develops this character - this fruit of the Spirit - within us, we will love with a truer love each day. Our love and obedience to God will grow not because we are seeking to earn favor from God or because we're obligatorily keeping His laws, but because as His children we have experienced His true, self-sacrificial, unquantifiable, and unmatched gift of love. When one experiences such true love, they cannot help but begin to embody that love themselves. A sovereign God who loves a sinner such as myself is my daily provision, my daily assurance, and the wellspring of life from which I drink. As I daily drink from God's character and life, his stream of living water flows out from me and into the world. And since the world I and God inhabit includes our enemies, those streams are to flow even into the world of my enemies.

Love, then, is not primarily a feeling towards someone who is close to you or someone to whom you're attracted, like many today think it is. Love is primarily a

decision. As Christ shows, it's a decision we make to humble ourselves, obey God, and serve others. We love not for our own benefit or because others are deserving of our love, but because it's how God created us to function and how God himself lived when he walked this Earth. We love because God first loved us, and we bear our maker's image. As we repent of all the self-centeredness in our lives and from our attempt to set ourselves up as gods and rulers of the universe, and as we turn to God for restoration and transformation - He will enable us to more accurately reflect His image beyond our own little microcosm of self and out into the cosmos. This outward love of others is how God created the world to be, and it's how the world will one day be again. As we move closer to that great day of restoration, rejoice not only in what will one day be, but in what God has already wrought through Jesus. God's Kingdom has come to Earth and if we know God, we are its citizens, new creations called to be God's ambassadors and to advance God's reign. We don't do this through the power of weapons, politics, argument, or living lives withdrawn from the world. We primarily bring Christ's Kingdom just as he did, through his body, broken and spilled out in love. Power is not found in coercive might, but rather in love. We, the church, are Christ's body, and if we know God, we will lay down our lives in love for our world, as our savior himself did. Through such foolish means God has brought us, His former enemies, salvation - and through these same foolish means and vessels he will advance his Kingdom until Christ's return. It is not the lion of Judah who John envisions conquering the world by devouring his enemies, but rather it is the lamb who was slain (Revelation 5:5-6). We are called to conquer in like fashion, through a love and concern for others that is so strong we are willing to lay down our lives.

Now let me leave you with these parting words from Paul in Ephesians 3, declaring that our God's love is power, and it is this power of love he works in us as we move out into the world as conquerors for our King:

**17 And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph. 3:17-21)**

## Appendix 12: Joy Jail

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/joy-jail>

Catalina and I have a somewhat unconventional way of handling property issues with our children. We developed it after reading a parenting book which highlighted our often pharasaical approach to parenting. Whenever a property dispute used to arise between our children, our immediate question had always been, "Who had it first?" But this didn't teach our children anything except that power and dominance came by a speedy and selfish appropriation of property. While we had a clear method for resolving the issue, our parenting did not at all address the idolatry of control, selfishness, a lack of consideration of others, and other issues of the heart. After realizing this pitfall, reading articles and books, and talking with those who were much wiser than we were, we decided to institute "Toy Jail."

Toy Jail is a wonderful thing. When we hear our kids fighting over a toy and they come to us for resolution, we only need to say one or two things. "What's more important, your toy or your sibling?" If their heart is unclear about which is most important, we follow up with, "If a toy is causing either of you to be mean to your brother or sister, or if a toy is getting in the way of your relationship, then that toy needs to go away. So you two need to work it out or the toy is going to Toy Jail." The beauty of this is that we don't even really have to resolve the issue at all. We make our kids have responsibility in their relationships. Rather than being arbiters of power from our throne of parenthood, we refuse to invoke initial power in disputes so relationships become the focus. By now, our kids usually work things out because we've taught them strategies for sharing. Sometimes one child is a peacemaker, gives in to the other, and just begins playing with something else. Sometimes they decide to take five-minute turns, and sometimes they decide to split the toys under dispute. And when they can't come to a resolution together, or if they don't come to us for mediation, the toys over which they were fighting go to jail. Toys can also be incarcerated if they hit each other with them or don't help the family by cleaning them up when we ask them to do so at the end of the day. They remain high up on an unreachable piece of furniture, in plain sight, until they are released every Sunday. They are visual reminders that objects will not stand in the way of us maintaining loving relationships towards others.

While I think the strategy of Toy Jail has been much more effective at tilling the heart - our hearts as well as our kids' hearts - we also use this strategy to teach another important lesson. We chose to make Sunday our day of release for

captured toys because we want Sundays to be a day our kids look forward to and celebrate. We want Sunday to be a day of joy. While discipline is vital for us all, discipline corrects unto a particular end. Discipline without an end in mind isn't really discipline, it's just punishment. It's simply punitive. Rather than using Toy Jail as a mere punitive measure, we wanted it to be a reminder of our ultimate end - the restoration of all things and our unity in community as we live perfectly in the Kingdom of God. When our kids have their toys taken away during the week, there is a recognition that the world - and especially our hearts - are not as they should be. But when their toys are restored, the kids are reminded that brokenness will one day be fixed.

Ending Toy Jail on Sundays adds to the long list of things we do to make Sundays special. We only indulge on chocolate cereal Sunday mornings (which also helps us to avoid fights about being late to church because breakfast took too long). Whoever had the bottom bunk for the last week now gets the top bunk. Our screen-time allotment for the week resets. Catalina and I open a bottle of wine. If we're on some sort of diet, we generally put it to the side on Sundays. If we ever have desserts, we generally have them on Sundays. We don't do work on Sundays and we try to use our time to focus on family. We do a lot to make Sundays the day we all look forward to. It's like a Jubilee Year. We let the land lay fallow, debts are forgiven, and we celebrate. All of these things go towards not only making Sundays anticipated, but it reminds us of the joy and rest God wants for us. It reminds us about why God instituted the Sabbath in the first place. We enjoy God, enjoy his blessings, rest in him, and trust in his future provisions. The Sabbath is a taste of God's goodness and a foretaste of the fulfillment of his promised restoration, the eternal Sabbath.

It's funny how while teaching truths to your children, you must often first learn the truths for yourself. Early in our married life we were content simply attempting to adhere to the 9 commandments of God rather than the 10, until children came along. Our children helped us to recognize how out of focus our own lives had become, and how we had put to the side notions of Sabbath rest God intended for our good. After children, we wanted them to learn to rest in God and to look to him for fulfillment, but that meant we had to model such a thing ourselves. Until we had kids, our lives looked just like they always had. They were lives that remained untransformed by God's teaching on rest. We were caught up in the rat race of life, pumping time, money, and effort into spinning the wheel. Our own participation in the system of materialism was all our kids would need in order to learn where they should themselves place their trust. But we didn't want that for our kids. We knew that wouldn't satisfy. We wanted our children to have godly desires. We wanted



their ultimate desire to be the Kingdom of God.

That's really where the problem lies, isn't it? Our desires. We're driven by them. While our family's bent had been towards pursuing the desire of materialism, other's may be bent towards being fulfilled socially, sexually, or in some other way. Desires, along with our interpretation of where their fulfillment lies, push and pull us towards different ends. The reason we have such a hard time resting in God and enjoying his Sabbath is because we believe that following his prescriptions will actually prevent us from fulfilling our deepest desires. Our restlessness betrays our true belief that our own effort and pursuits are our only hope in having our desires fulfilled. We all have so many competing desires, to only desire the Kingdom seems like an impossible task. But is a desire to be fed, clothed, housed, loved, happy, comfortable, and accepted contrary to desiring the Kingdom? Or are those sorts of desires all components of what the Kingdom will entail? About a year ago I came across a perplexing but insightful idea about desires from Saint Gregory of Nyssa. In his book "On the Soul and the Resurrection," he says the following,

***IF THEN, THE SOUL IS PURIFIED OF EVERY VICE...THEN, THERE WILL BE NO LONGER NEED OF THE IMPULSE OF DESIRE TO LEAD THE WAY TO THE BEAUTIFUL. WHOEVER PASSES HIS TIME IN DARKNESS, HE IT IS WHO WILL BE UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF A DESIRE FOR THE LIGHT; BUT WHENEVER HE COMES INTO THE LIGHT, THEN ENJOYMENT TAKES THE PLACE OF DESIRE, AND THE POWER TO ENJOY RENDERS DESIRE USELESS AND OUT OF DATE. IT WILL THEREFORE BE NO DETRIMENT TO OUR PARTICIPATION IN THE GOOD, THAT THE SOUL SHOULD BE FREE FROM SUCH EMOTIONS, AND TURNING BACK UPON HERSELF SHOULD KNOW HERSELF ACCURATELY WHAT HER ACTUAL NATURE IS, AND SHOULD BEHOLD THE ORIGINAL BEAUTY REFLECTED IN THE MIRROR AND IN THE FIGURE OF HER OWN BEAUTY***

Nyssa is essentially saying that once we are in the presence of God, desire will be nonexistent. Now such a thought might seem a bit gnostic at first, as though Nyssa thinks the body and desires are bad. But after giving him the benefit of the doubt and thinking about it for awhile, I don't think that's what Nyssa says. Rather, Nyssa is arguing that desires are signs of the fall or signs of imperfection. They're an indication that something is incomplete because the only way we can have cravings or strong desires is if we are unfulfilled or unprovided for. Nyssa uses an example of a guy who goes from darkness to light. In my mind, I imagine the Thai soccer team trapped in the cave for weeks. How strong their desire must have been

to see the light of day while they were hunkered down in that cave. But once their eyes basked in the actual light of day, their desire for light vanished. It didn't vanish because they no longer liked or wanted light, but because desire turned into fulfillment and actual experience. As Nyssa says, desire became enjoyment, and enjoyment made desire obsolete. There was no room for desire because desire is future oriented and the boys were experiencing light in the present. Nyssa is arguing that we are like these Thai boys. When we are in the presence of God - in the light - we will no longer have desires because we will never know a moment absent of present fulfillment and enjoyment.

While desires may be a sign that the world is not as it should be, they aren't necessarily bad in and of themselves. Desires are often indicators of God's original intent. We desire food because God made our bodies to require nourishment. We desire water because God made our bodies to require hydration. We desire dialogue with others because God made us to be social beings. We desire sex because God created us to have intimacy and bear offspring. Certainly desires can be manipulated and misplaced, but they are generally good indicators of who we were created to be, and how the world was meant to be. These appropriate desires are meant to be fulfilled.

Unfortunately, humanity has done a wonderful job of mucking up our pursuit of fulfillment. In the first place, we have stumbled in a like manner to those ancients we scoffingly critique as ignorant barbarians. The ancients turned rivers, trees, and celestial bodies - these created, inanimate, mechanistic entities - into deities they worshipped. That admittedly sounds absurd to our modern ears. Yet we moderns do the same thing with desires. We worshipers of humanity have turned human desire - a created function or feeling - into something we must worship, bow down to, and follow religiously. If one is a materialist, this problem is even worse, as desires much more closely resemble rivers, trees, and celestial bodies in their mechanistic trajectories. Most of us, rather than recognizing desires as general indicators of the ultimate, fulfilled good, have turned each person's desires into their own good pursuits - their own ultimate ends. Rather than a desire for sex guiding us to discover that a loving, monogamous relationship is good, we encourage worshipping the gods of polyamory, promiscuity, and the likes. Rather than a desire for financial provision guiding us to a moderate lifestyle, we worship the gods of accrued wealth, selfishness, work, security, and pragmatism. We not only worship these gods - they become our identity. We are slaves of desire who increasingly become conformed to the image of that which our urgings dictate. Our desires have run amuck.

C.S. Lewis, in his book "Mere Christianity," delves a little into the irrationality and despicability of where our desires often lead us in our sinful state. I think his insight sheds some light on the situation at hand. Lewis says,

***YOU CAN GET A LARGE AUDIENCE TOGETHER FOR A STRIP-TEASE ACT—THAT IS, TO WATCH A GIRL UNDRRESS ON THE STAGE. NOW SUPPOSE YOU CAME TO A COUNTRY WHERE YOU COULD FILL A THEATRE BY SIMPLY BRINGING A COVERED PLATE ON TO THE STAGE AND THEN SLOWLY LIFTING THE COVER SO AS TO LET EVERY ONE SEE, JUST BEFORE THE LIGHTS WENT OUT, THAT IT CONTAINED A MUTTON CHOP OR A BIT OF BACON, WOULD YOU NOT THINK THAT IN THAT COUNTRY SOMETHING HAD GONE WRONG WITH THE APPETITE FOR FOOD? AND WOULD NOT ANYONE WHO HAD GROWN UP IN A DIFFERENT WORLD THINK THERE WAS SOMETHING EQUALLY QUEER ABOUT THE STATE OF THE SEX INSTINCT AMONG US?***

When desires are used as indicators which guide us towards the pursuit of objective good and fulfillment, they are beneficial and useful. But on their own, desires are terrible gods. They are reminders that we live in an imperfect world where want and despair exist – and will always exist, apart from our seeking of that which truly fulfills. But so often, rather than seek the fulfillment of desire as some objective truth which can be discovered, we subjectivize the ends to which desires point. Instead of harmonizing our desires and discovering what they are telling us is good, we view each one's desire as the ultimate good in itself. But desires were never meant to satisfy. As Nyssa tells us, they were meant to be nagging dissatisfactions which make us crave the only source of true fulfillment and restoration. Worshipped as gods, desires leave us unfulfilled in our vain pursuits. Like a famished person who attends Lewis's mutton chop strip-tease for entertainment rather than for eating the mutton chop, so it often is with us as we seek to fulfill our desires in ways which will never truly satiate them.

Unfortunately, like the world, we Christians pursue the same fleeting vanity of desires. How strange it is for us to look on the prospect of a restored Kingdom - a desire steeped in a yearning for the ultimate good - yet so infrequently seek to experience its fulfillment as was intended. How exactly are we to experience this Kingdom? By living it out. Matthew 5-6 give us some explicit ideas as to what this looks like, as Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount, calls believers to be salt and light, and then tells them how to live in the Kingdom. We experience the Kingdom when we forego not only murder, but hatred as well. We experience the Kingdom when we forego not only adultery, but lust. We experience the Kingdom

when we speak truth and when we love everyone - even our enemies. We experience the Kingdom of God when we generously give to others, when we fast, and when we pray without seeking recognition. We experience the Kingdom of God as we seek to live our lives in right relationship to others, and in right relationship to God.

We Western Christians, however, are so coddled and conditioned that rarely do we tangibly feel the joy of a Kingdom undergoing restoration. What do we need restored? We have all good things and all fulfillment at our fingertips! Rather than giving generously, we hoard, accumulate, and indulge for ourselves. What is capital and material for, anyway? Rather than love enemies, we hold grudges against them and seek their harm. Isn't that why litigation and social media exist? If I don't exact justice, then who will? Like the depraved persons at Lewis's strip-tease, we "ooh" and "aah" over the Kingdom Christ brought, yet fail to seek the fulfillment of this Kingdom desire in appropriate ways. We use the Bible and religion to accomplish and justify our wayward desires rather than use our appropriate desire for a restored Kingdom to guide our actions and begin to experience true fulfillment even now, in the Kingdom Christ established and currently rules over.

I think it is for this reason that difficulties, illnesses, deaths of loved ones, wars, and the like tend to bring people closer to God. Such events are the best tools to expose our wayward desires as frauds. The desire to accrue wealth may seem legitimate in our society, but when wealth is stripped, so is its facade of fulfillment. The same goes with any of our other desires we make ultimate. But the good news is that we can evaluate our desires and refine them. We can implement practices which help us to truly seek and experience the Kingdom of God. I have already explained how my family has begun to do this through tradition, as we remind ourselves of certain truths each week, looking forward to Sunday. We also try to seek the Kingdom through the way we give, through the way we love those who have offended us, etc. The leadership at our church has also helped us to grow in this area, as they fast before our monthly communion. We have come to recognize the importance of purposefully implementing practices which remind us of our want and imperfection here - practices which amplify our desires - while focusing us on the restored Kingdom where our relationships with God and others are central. We cause our desires and yearnings to grow through giving, fasting, and forgiving enemies, but we simultaneously kill the lie that wealth, food, and self-justice are the ends which will fulfill these desires. We seek to only fulfill our desires in ways which point us to the true source of fulfillment, God. Daily we fail to seek the Kingdom, yet through the lessons God is teaching us, he keeps the

vision ever before us. And as our inability, failure, and humiliation grow, so does our desire for ultimate restoration.

While we have put into practice a number of Kingdom reminders over the past few years, fasting before communion is the newest practice for me. Admittedly, I am a lover of food who finds it difficult to fast. But this past year, as I was going through a New Testament survey class put on by an Orthodox priest, I learned about their practice of fasting. As the Orthodox take communion each Sunday, they fast the full day prior to communion, having the Eucharist be the first morsel of sustenance to touch their lips when they break their fast. In this way, not only does the Eucharist figuratively commemorate Christ's work, but its meaning is made more tangible to the practitioner as they experience joy, fulfillment, and nourishment in a way they wouldn't otherwise experience apart from fasting. The beauty of this practice, along with the encouragement of our church leadership, have lead me to discover the joy that lies in this practice. This self-infliction of pain, or this denial of pleasure, is a way in which I remind my body that it is imperfect and that this world can only provide momentary fulfillment. Having my fast broken with the Eucharist, in the presence of the church, fulfills my desire to taste food, and at the same time, through the symbol and real presence of Christ, reminds me that true fulfillment comes only through God. Jesus is the bread of life. This Eucharist is intended to be a tangible experience of a spiritual reality now, brought about by a past work, providing a future hope. All too often the Eucharist has been only a past event for me, merely commemorative. It has mostly been a ritual, not an experience. But that is beginning to change as I reflect on spiritual disciplines, joy, and the work of Christ.

True Christianity imposes God onto us. Jesus refuses to allow us to shape God into our own image. That's why we find so many of Christ's commands and ideas of spiritual discipline repulsive or metaphoric. They would require us to comport to God. Stanley Haurwas said that sentimentality, not atheism, is the biggest threat to Christianity. I think he was right. While the atheist may believe that God does not exist at all, the sentimentalist believes that it is his God which exists - the god in his own image and of his own making. Yet Jesus undermines such idolatry when he tells us to be perfect as God is perfect, and immediately follows that statement up by detailing a number of spiritual disciplines (giving, prayer, fasting, and faith). I used to think that spiritual disciplines were just empty and rote practices adhered to by legalists. Jesus seemed to think that too, because as he described true spiritual disciplines, he went well beyond the practice which easily propped up human ego and image, instead emphasizing the heart. It is unfortunate that the goal of many practitioners who implement spiritual disciplines is humanistic. Many use spiritual

disciplines to prove that they can obtain something - usually God's favor, self-control, a blessed life, etc. But the true practice of spiritual disciplines - emptying oneself and foregoing the vapid pleasures of life - are not about overcoming. They are about being overcome. Overcome by the realization that we are frail and finite beings. The realization that we lack willpower. The realization that the world outside ourselves is much bigger than the one we've created in which we make ourselves the center. True spiritual disciplines are not practiced by atheists or Christian sentimentalists. They're practiced by Christian realists - those who live in and look forward to the completion of the Kingdom of God.

To most, it seems like the incarceration of joy - the stymying of fulfilled desires through spiritual disciplines - would lead to depression and a poor view on life. To many, it likely seems overly ascetic. That might be true, were we reliable at appropriately defining what true joys are. But as the toys in our house are jailed each week, as the sweets and wine are shelved until the Sabbath, as the Eucharist actually nourishes our deprived bodies and souls after a fast, and as we desperately try (and usually fail) to give to others while maintaining a right heart - I am reminded of what true joy really is. I have come to realize that all along it hasn't been desires which are wrong. How strange would it be not to have desires in an imperfect world? No. Instead, it's been my joys which have been misplaced. I have desires, and these desires are good. They are indicators that the world is not as it should be, and that something better exists. But all too often I seek to fulfill those desires in the wrong places. My body is learning that food doesn't ultimately satisfy. My materialistic side is learning that more money in the bank doesn't really make me more secure. Since my family has begun to increase our desires and withhold the fulfillment of our joys, I have found that my joy is ironically more full than it ever was. Perhaps that's because through spiritual disciplines, I'm not really putting my joy in jail, but rather God is finally teaching me how to set true joy free.

## Appendix 13: The Death of Love

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/the-death-of-love>

John Lennon, singer and song writer for the Beatles, was one of the most popular musicians of all time. But Lennon didn't just write music. He was a lyricist who incorporated his philosophy into his music. On the topic before us today, love, one of Lennon's more popular songs entitled "All You Need Is Love" declared just that. All we need is love. Lennon wrote another very popular song entitled "Imagine," which was a vision of how we could build a world saturated with the love Lennon thought we needed. Lennon says, "Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No Hell Below us. Above us, only sky... You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope some day you'll join us. And the world will live as one." In Lennon's mind, religion was an impediment to love, not a conduit. If we could just get rid of religion - if we could just get rid of the division religion causes, then the world could finally be free to love.

Unfortunately, Lennon was a far better musician than he was a philosopher. But despite his poor philosophy, his beliefs have been peddled to hundreds of millions of listeners throughout the decades, and his beliefs have unfortunately gained popularity. Like Lennon, many today believe that love would be in a much better condition if we could just rid it of the burden of religion. However, I am here to tell you that without religion - specifically without a religion like Christianity which has a relational God at its center - love is dead.

We intuitively know that this is not the case. Love is not dead. It is very much alive. In fact, sometimes love for others actually brings life. Take, for example, our close family friend, \*Kristy. In her early 20's, Kristy was diagnosed with Leukemia. Having a rare blood type, it was difficult for Kristy to find any bone marrow donors from her family to save her life. Until one day, \*Ernst, a complete stranger from Germany, somehow saw her name and blood type on a registry - a blood type which matched his own. Ernst lovingly decided to undergo the painful procedure of bone marrow extraction in order to save a stranger's life on the opposite side of the world. What a noble and inspiring act of self-sacrificial love!

But what if, like Lennon, we imagine a world without God - what do we get? How would we make sense of the moving love we see in Ernst and Kristy's story? In a world without God, what you see is exactly what you get. Everything is physical. There are no souls, no angels, no demons, no afterlife. Everything is simply physical matter. There is not sensibly anything that is commendable or

inspiring or praiseworthy. Nothing deeper than simple synapses firing in our brains to give us the illusion that we are in love, acting out of love, or loved by any others. We call this concept materialism. Today I want to give you three specific ways a lack of belief in God - or a belief in materialism - undermines our understanding and experience of love.

**On materialism, intentionality does not exist.** When rain falls from the sky, no magic has occurred. It's simply that the water which evaporated into the sky gathered around dust particles and became so heavy that the cloud could no longer contain them, falling as precipitation. When you turn on a heater to warm the frigid air in a room, the heater doesn't magically zap heat into the air. Rather, through conduction and convection, warmer particles with higher kinetic energies bump into colder particles of air and circulate around the room until the particles which bump into you are moving with more energy than they were before. In these actions there is no intentionality. Rain does not act as it does to aid the farmer and hot air has no concern for your comfort. Everything is simply cause and effect.

On materialism, we are no different than water droplets or air particles in the sense that like them, we are mere matter in motion. Like water pulled to earth by the effects of gravity or heat distributed through the gas laws, our bodies and our actions are guided by unintentional, mechanistic processes. While we are certainly more complex than a water molecule, our bodies and brains adhere to the exact same chemical, mechanical, and physical processes as the rest of nature. And if we are merely physical creatures reacting to physical processes, then anything we produce must likewise demonstrate itself as a physical reaction to a physical process. Like begets like, biologically or philosophically. On materialism, love is then just a physical reaction our bodies and brains create to prior conditions. We don't act in love, but rather are acted on by natural forces to produce actions we then call love. There is no intentionality in any act of love, only mechanistic, determined reaction.

When considering the story of Ernst and Kristy, materialism saps it of its inspirational qualities. Ernst was simply doing what his genes and experiences had programmed him to do. With all the stimuli in his life leading up to the point when he saw the bone marrow registry, Ernst could have done nothing else but choose to become a donor. Like the rain falling from the sky, Ernst was matter in motion, set on a course by previous causal forces, and not of any immaterial intention or volition.

Beyond the problem of intentionality, **on materialism, nature's only "concern"**



or "goal" is survival. Really, survival is not a goal of impersonal nature, but simply a description of how nature functions in the eyes of those who value survival. I don't consider the eroding of a cliff face as some travesty levied against the cliff by nature, nor should I lament my slowly decaying body as some slight against me. A rock and a person have the same value in a materialistic world - a value of 0. There is no good, no bad, no better, or no worse - all there is is "just is." The universe is indifferent to the existence or survival of anything - rock or human. However, as it relates to life, only those who survive and only those who wish to survive are able to pass on their genes in large numbers. This means that if I have a false belief, but my false belief helps me to survive better than your true belief, then my genes will get passed on while yours will not, even though I'm wrong and you're right. Let's take for example the notion of free will. If I am a nihilist who believes that there is no God and therefore no soul, then I likely conclude that there is also no such thing as free will. If there's no soul, no will, no morality, and no God and I conclude there is no meaning in life, then I may believe I have nothing to live for except pleasure. For some, this thought of determinism and the removal of agency and the sense of "self" may be too difficult to deal with. If the goal of an individual on this system is to experience as much pleasure as they can, and their lives are fraught with difficulty and pain, then they may commit suicide in higher numbers than other groups. If nihilism were true but tended towards producing more individuals inclined towards self-destruction, then the truth of nihilism would be significantly hampered by its tendency to produce martyrs, while the fiction of free will would propagate through the blissfully ignorant. In nature, there is no inherent value to truth. True beliefs or false beliefs, only those which are advantageous to survival determine what will continue in its existence.

To demonstrate further this notion of survival as the determinate factor of action, I want to turn to one of my favorite atheists, the late Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens once held a debate about religion with his Christian brother. I believe that in this debate Hitchens gives us one of the best, most honest looks at what love, on materialism, truly is and how it is tied to one's own survival and self-interest. Hitchens says,

***IT'S IN MY INTEREST THAT PEOPLE DON'T SUFFER. I DON'T WANT SOMEONE BLEEDING TO DEATH FROM AIDS ON MY DOORSTEP. NOT JUST FOR THEIR SAKE - FOR MINE I DON'T WANT THAT. OSCAR WILDE IN 'THE SOUL OF MAN UNDER SOCIALISM' PUTS IT VERY BEAUTIFULLY. HE SAYS, 'SOCIALISM WOULD FREE US FROM THE AWFUL NECESSITY OF LIVING FOR OTHERS.' GEORGE***

**BERNARD SHAW WHEN HE RAN FOR OFFICE IN LONDON SAID THAT THERE SHOULD BE NO MORE HOUSES BUILT FOR THE WORKING CLASSES WITHOUT BATHS. IT WAS OBJECTED BY [CERTAIN POLITICIANS] WHO SAID, 'WHY GIVE THE POOR BATHS? THEY'RE SO STUPID THEY WON'T KNOW HOW TO USE THEM. THEY'LL KEEP COAL IN THEM. THEY DON'T DESERVE BATHS. YOU'RE WASTING YOUR COMPASSION ON THEM.' HE SAID, 'I DON'T WANT THEM TO HAVE A BATH FOR THEIR SAKE, I WANT THEM TO HAVE A BATH FOR MY SAKE.' THAT'S THE RIGHT MIX OF SELF-INTEREST AND MORALITY.**

Essentially, Hitchens argues that love and altruism are largely done to ensure our survival. In the example Hitchens gives, he says that he doesn't want someone dying of AIDS on his doorstep, likely because he doesn't want to contract AIDS himself and therefore reduce his survival chances. We can extrapolate such a rationale further and apply it elsewhere. Some may give money to charities in order to feel as though their life has purpose. Some may donate a kidney to their kids so their name will carry on. On materialism, the strong who survive - the ones who nature most helps to pass on their genes - are not the ones who love others at cost to themselves. Rather, it is those who love themselves so much that even the thing that they call "love" is in some way self-centered. Not only can nature not produce love, but nature has no concern for true love. In fact, nature is antagonistic to true, self-sacrificial love. It selects only for survival, and therefore only for self-interest masquerading as "love."

Coming back to Ernst and Kristy, we can observe that on materialism, Ernst's love was actually rather foolish. Rather than be awed and moved by Ernst's love, we should be repulsed by it. We should never do such a thing in a world where survival is selected. We would never put ourselves in a position where our chances of infection were greater or where our pain was increased without benefit to ourselves. Sacrificial love is a weakness nature seeks to cull. It is likely that Ernst's line is weaker than others, and his offspring have less of a chance at survival. We may praise Ernst because we want people like him to be around if we're ever in need of altruism directed towards us for our survival, but there is no way that an individual should seek to emulate Ernst in a materialistic world.

So on materialism, not only does nature fail to produce love, and not only does nature select against truth and self-sacrifice, but nature cannot prescribe love. Nature can't tell us that love is good and should be pursued. This is because **on materialism, only descriptions exist.**

When I walk into the doctor's office, the first thing they do is look at my body and listen to me describe what is going on. Maybe they hear a cough, they feel that I have a fever, or I tell them I saw a rash on my leg. Together we make observations about what is happening with my body. The doctor then takes into account all of the descriptions, and through her expertise, makes a prescription. She prescribes some medicine for me to take or some routine for me to follow. What I do with her prescription is my business. For patients with chemotherapy, a doctor's prescription is only followed if the patient desires to extend their life. But if that patient seeks a high quality of life during their remaining months, they may choose to forego the doctor's prescription. They may value a prescription for quality of life over a prescription for the extension of life. Understanding this distinction between the observation of description and the goal of prescription are extremely important as we discuss love in a materialistic world.

Lennon, like most of us, rightly believed that love is something more prescriptive than descriptive. It has some sort of a moral nature. We're required to love our fellow humans, at least to a certain extent. We all expect others to love at least enough not to murder, rape, or steal. Unfortunately, Lennon's notion of love crumbles in a materialistic world because materialism can only provide us with descriptions, not obligatory prescriptions. If I want to survive in this world, I may not want to do drugs. But who can tell me that this is what I should or should not do? I have no maker who created me towards certain ends and can tell me what I ought to do. I define good and evil for myself. I may break civil laws if I do drugs, but those aren't objective moral laws, as these change from country to country and are made up by majorities of people who agree on them. If I offend a group of people with different, self-created moralities, who cares (especially if I can avoid being caught)? The same is true with murder. If I want to get along in society and not risk going to jail, there is a prescription for me not to murder. But who is there to tell me that I am obliged not to murder? I can do whatever I want. Murder may go against that which is normal, but aberrations in mechanistic systems are not immoralities. Hear Ted Bundy - one of the world's most devious and prolific serial killers - on his very logical conclusion about morality in a materialistic universe.

***THEN I LEARNED THAT ALL MORAL JUDGMENTS ARE 'VALUE JUDGMENTS,' THAT ALL VALUE JUDGMENTS ARE SUBJECTIVE, AND THAT NONE CAN BE PROVED TO BE EITHER 'RIGHT' OR 'WRONG.' I EVEN READ SOMEWHERE THAT THE CHIEF JUSTICE OF THE UNITED STATES HAD WRITTEN THAT THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION EXPRESSED NOTHING MORE THAN COLLECTIVE***

**VALUE JUDGMENTS. BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I FIGURED OUT FOR MYSELF—WHAT APPARENTLY THE CHIEF JUSTICE COULDN'T FIGURE OUT FOR HIMSELF—THAT IF THE RATIONALITY OF ONE VALUE JUDGMENT WAS ZERO, MULTIPLYING IT BY MILLIONS WOULD NOT MAKE IT ONE WHIT MORE RATIONAL. NOR IS THERE ANY 'REASON' TO OBEY THE LAW FOR ANYONE, LIKE MYSELF, WHO HAS THE BOLDNESS AND DARING—THE STRENGTH OF CHARACTER—TO THROW OFF ITS SHACKLES...I DISCOVERED THAT TO BECOME TRULY FREE, TRULY UNFETTERED, I HAD TO BECOME TRULY UNINHIBITED. AND I QUICKLY DISCOVERED THAT THE GREATEST OBSTACLE TO MY FREEDOM, THE GREATEST BLOCK AND LIMITATION TO IT, CONSISTS IN THE INSUPPORTABLE 'VALUE JUDGMENT' THAT I WAS BOUND TO RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS. I ASKED MYSELF, WHO WERE THESE 'OTHERS?' OTHER HUMAN BEINGS, WITH HUMAN RIGHTS? WHY IS IT MORE WRONG TO KILL A HUMAN ANIMAL THAN ANY OTHER ANIMAL, A PIG OR A SHEEP OR A STEER? IS YOUR LIFE MORE THAN A HOG'S LIFE TO A HOG? WHY SHOULD I BE WILLING TO SACRIFICE MY PLEASURE MORE FOR THE ONE THAN FOR THE OTHER? SURELY, YOU WOULD NOT, IN THIS AGE OF SCIENTIFIC ENLIGHTENMENT, DECLARE THAT GOD OR NATURE HAS MARKED SOME PLEASURES AS 'MORAL' OR 'GOOD' AND OTHERS AS 'IMMORAL' OR 'BAD'? IN ANY CASE, LET ME ASSURE YOU, MY DEAR YOUNG LADY, THAT THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO COMPARISON BETWEEN THE PLEASURE THAT I MIGHT TAKE IN EATING HAM AND THE PLEASURE I ANTICIPATE IN RAPING AND MURDERING YOU. THAT IS THE HONEST CONCLUSION TO WHICH MY EDUCATION HAS LED ME—AFTER THE MOST CONSCIENTIOUS EXAMINATION OF MY SPONTANEOUS AND UNINHIBITED SELF.**

Bundy recognized that an impersonal, mechanistic nature cannot impart to us obligatory morals. If nature is only material, then nature simply exists as a series of processes which occur in cause and effect succession, devoid of intentionality or obligation. Just as it would be silly of someone to tell me that I should eat more and desire to be more massive because more massive objects have more gravity, so it is ludicrous to pretend that you can demand that I love because it tends to produce the effect of survival in greater measure. On materialism there is no greater prescriptive value or obligation between these two equations:  $A + B = C$  and  $X + Y = Z$ . So what? Who cares which equation I choose? Who gets to tell me that I should desire the effect of increased survival over the effect of increased

gravity? More people in our world may choose survival, but majorities don't establish an obligatory morality, just a coercive one. There is no ultimate consequence in my decision to dismiss the majority's prescription to love. Like every other human, I will eventually die, and so too will all future generations, until all is destroyed at the heat death of the universe. Most of the time, love, on materialism, is simply a self-interested endeavor "prescribed" by nature for those who want to survive and pass on their seed. And true love of the self-sacrificial kind is an aberration the majority appreciates in others as it tends towards the majority's survival. But in no way is true love a universal good or a universal obligation in a materialistic world.

Looking at Ernst and Kristy's story one last time, we can see that Ernst's story in a materialistic world should not motivate us towards similar actions. Ernst may make many observations and descriptions. He may tell us that he saved a life. He may tell us that he felt good about what he did. He may state that he handled the bone marrow operation unscathed and we'd likely be fine if we did it too. But nothing about that makes love something which can call us to perform similar actions of altruism. We may be surprised at altruistic love, but we shouldn't be moved by it. Ernst's actions are just a series of actions, feelings, and events we can observe, but that's all we can do. On materialism, I define my morality and purpose, not Ernst.

As I hope you can see, a world without God makes love as we understand it to be, unintelligible. Without God, love is mechanistic and unintentional, self-centered, and love is not an objective good which can be prescribed with obligation. But with God - with God - love is truly love.

Our God, through the Bible, paints a beautiful picture of love. He created the world with ensouled creatures who are more than mere matter - creatures with agency and wills capable of receiving their maker's moral commands. Their role was to love God, take care of nature, and love each other. They were to be anything but self-centered. Unfortunately, humanity chose to look away from God and unto themselves. Chaos now ensues in a world where love once flourished. But God - a God who says that he himself is love - has mercy on us. Through Jesus Christ, his son, God left his throne to live like us, suffering and dying so that we could be released from our sinful self-focus. God calls those who follow him to do the same thing he did and embody love to the world. God tells us that this love is for everyone, not just our neighbors who can repay us for our love, but even for those who are our enemies - love is for those who persecute us and seek our harm. God's love is not a fake love which masks self-centeredness - it is self-sacrificial. God's love is not a creation of some random or mechanistic process - it's relational. And

God's love is not a mere suggestion, it is a command which his creations are expected to follow, not simply because God their maker commanded it, but because God himself demonstrated it.

I will agree with Lennon on one thing. All we need is love. But the definition and quality of love varies significantly between Lennon's world and God's world. If he is right about our need for love, and if his world can't provide it, then I challenge you to question whose world you're living in and whether it can produce the kind of love you know love to truly be

## Appendix 14: When Not Helping Hurts

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/when-not-helping-hurts>

Over the past few years, God has placed within us a desire for mercy ministry. With this call, he has provided us with a number of wonderful opportunities to love and grace others. But whereas we originally began answering the call with the idea that we would be bringing mercy and grace to others, we have come to find that transformative power in God's call has more frequently been directed towards us. God has taught us many things over the past few years. Just when I feel I'm getting to the point where I "get it," God reminds me that he still has quite a bit of work to do on me.

While I certainly didn't think I knew everything about ministering to the poor - in fact, far from it - I did think I had a pretty good handle on the philosophy I needed to embrace in order to pursue mercy ministry. A few years back our diaconate read through a book called "When Helping Hurts." It was amazing. It put the notion of poverty and the fix for poverty into such an applicable light. All of us know that throwing money at poverty doesn't fix it. Rather than being simply a money problem, poverty almost always includes a relational problem. This may mean that a social network is lacking, that there is spiritual poverty which leads to immoral and costly choices, there is a poverty of family which means an individual is raised without what most of us would consider common guidance about life, etc. Throwing money at the symptoms that stem from these problems doesn't fix poverty. The broken relationships must be addressed. Overall, "When Helping Hurts" made a lot of sense, and it gave me more confidence in pursuing mercy ministry with a clearer directive.

Boy, how my assurance of this philosophy has been pressured in my first six months here in Romania. While I am not going to disagree outright with the philosophy behind "When Helping Hurts," I think its message had the unintended consequence of bolstering my pragmatism. I have a feeling that most Americans are like me. We don't need much of a boost to our pragmatic tendencies. I've come to the conclusion that while "When Helping Hurts" has some very important things to say about how we move forward on a larger scale to combat the entrenchment of poverty - to fix it - most of our day to day encounters with need come on the personal scale and are more about our attitude and action than about solving an issue Jesus himself seemed to think would never be solved this side of restoration.

One of the most significant convictions God has brought to my heart in the past two years is related to the way I value efficiency. I am a very pragmatic individual. But of the many lessons we can see reiterated throughout scripture, God's overthrow of, and often disdain for the pragmatic is at the forefront. God used an aged and barren couple to propagate a line that would bless all peoples. God used a bumbling murderer to save his people from slavery. God whittled Gideon's army down to hundreds to defeat an army of tens of thousands. God condemned Israel's pragmatism when it sought an alliance with Egypt rather than trusting in his provision. Jesus was revulsed by the pragmatism of the Pharisees as they hedged the laws with their own laws in order to stay far from sin. And God himself was humbled as a baby, and submitted to a bringing of his Kingdom through suffering and death rather than through political or military means.

Our God is anything but a pragmatic God, at least in the way that we define pragmatism. God's use of the feeble, the incapable, the messed up, and the weak may be impractical to accomplish a task with speed, ease, and assurance. But the use of that which is impractical builds our trust in God and provides us with hope that God can even use vessels like us. God's call for us to take up our cross, suffer, turn the other cheek, submit to one another, and love even our enemies are impractical means to asserting our power in the world, maximizing our pleasure, and minimizing discomfort. But they are wonderfully pragmatic means to bring about our conformity to the image of Christ. God may be a pragmatic God, but he is undoubtedly pragmatic towards different means and ends than those to which we tend.

"When Helping Hurts" was alluring to me largely because of its pragmatic approach. The authors provide a list of anecdotes and studies that bolster their case for approaching poverty. Unsurprisingly, they conclude that just handing out goods can be detrimental to the poor. I agree. Handing out resources doesn't fix poverty. In fact, if you give goods out in large quantities or with great frequency you can even do harm to the poor. The authors make this observation, then move beyond this basic point to posit a biblical side to poverty which centers around relationships. If we want to fix poverty we need to do so with a view of relationships. I wholeheartedly agree with them. But recently I have begun to question the basic assumption that was perpetuated in me through this book – the assumption that my responsibility when I give is to seek the fixing of poverty – or more simply, to make effectiveness in giving my focus. To be fair, it has been awhile since I've read the book. I don't at all think the authors were saying that it's our role to fix poverty or that the heart of giving is pragmatism. In fact, they do emphasize the importance of relationship. But the authors also make it very clear that they do not



advocate just giving to an individual in need. While the book does a fantastic job of explaining how to address poverty strategically, my problem as an American Christian was never that I was giving away too much money indiscriminately. My problem was that I wasn't giving enough away, and that I was being too stringent with my giving stipulations - creating cold systems of determination that took grace and generosity out of the giving. As a stand-alone resource in my particular culture, "When Helping Hurts" just further ingrained my bad giving habits and provided me with a platform from which to justify them. I love much of the wise insight found in the book as well as the heart, but I think there are some important aspects of giving that are overlooked which can help to round out and balance the view the authors put forward.

As a Christian I think it is vital that we push back against the curse. Yes, we are called to push back against things like poverty. But it's important that we understand what God says about giving, what his purposes are in our giving, and how he defines "effectiveness." "When Helping Hurts" helps us to identify how we can do some of this work pragmatically. But what I believe God's command for our giving and generosity aren't just about fixing poverty, and his means often don't fully conform to our human pragmatism and definitions of effectiveness. The following are three aspects I believe are either missed by or overlooked in the pragmatic approach to giving.

### **We Assume Giving is About Changing Others**

I was listening to a New Testament survey class a few weeks ago and the speaker was going over Matthew 6. Right before we get into chapter 6, Jesus commands listeners to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Chapter 6 and 7, then, are Jesus's explanation of how we should be perfect through positive action. Chapters 6-7 are essentially the spiritual disciplines we are to put on that will help us to bear fruit and throw off the negative actions mentioned in chapter 5. Christ discusses prayer, fasting, trust in God (not being anxious), not judging others, and loving others. But the very first discipline Jesus mentions is giving to the needy. It seems that God's primary concern here in this section of Matthew is that our hearts are changed through various disciplines. In fact, in all of these positive disciplines we are encouraged to only focus on ourselves. When we give, we should do so in secret. Yes, we are giving to others, but we alone are the ones who know our action. It's between us and God. When we pray, we should do so without fanfare. When we fast, we should do so without drawing attention to ourselves and looking "gloomy." When we are judging, we must be introspective and judge ourselves, not focusing on the specks that others have in their eyes. And while we are to ensure we don't focus on what's going on in the minds of others, all of these

prescribed actions help to shape our relationship with God. When we pray, we are acknowledging God's sovereignty and will. When we fast, we are reminded of our reliance on God for even our daily bread. When we avoid judging others, we are introspective about our own sin and we must trust in God to bring about his justice and judgment on ourselves and others. And if we are to love others as much as we love ourselves - even our enemies - how can we do this without divine intervention and example? The spiritual disciplines Matthew lays out are centered around our own hearts, not around fixing any ills or issues in others. In fact, these examples are to the contrary. Time and time again we're told not to worry about others when we perform these disciplines.

Such a truth has been demonstrated in my own heart time and time again here in Romania. I could give a number of examples, but perhaps the best is the usual weekly grocery trip we take. Quite frequently upon exiting the grocery store, a woman carrying a baby and medical documentation or a group of kids with tattered clothes will come up to me and beg for food. When I say "beg," I mean it quite literally. They are relentless, tugging on every heart string imaginable. At first, there was compassion. I felt so bad for these individuals and wanted to help. But I knew what "When Helping Hurts" says, so I didn't. Over time, my continued encounters with these beggars deformed my compassion and sorrow into resentment and anger. Learning more about the beggar culture here, seeing the same individuals over and over (if you can beg as a day job, why not get a day job?), and continuing to hoard my goods without giving made my heart more and more hardened to these people. Finally, Catalina and I began trying something a little different. Whenever we went grocery shopping, we went with the assumption that we were going to be approached by some beggars. We started getting extra milk and eggs each time we went shopping with the intent of giving them away. When we went shopping, we shopped for the beggars as well as ourselves. I can't tell you how much that softened our hearts to these people. Instead of thinking about handing over some of our goods after a long grocery trip, we made sure that some of what we got was dedicated to others. While there is still significant frustration at times, our giving helped our hearts. Now we don't question intentions, sincerity, truthfulness, need, legitimacy, worth, or any of that. We simply give.

The fact of the matter is that we can financially afford to give some eggs and milk to those in need when we make grocery trips. This is money we would likely otherwise spend on ourselves. But I don't know that we could spiritually afford to continue working here in Romania without just giving. Looking in the eyes of the needy -

regardless of whether they are "deserving" needy - and denying them time and time again would just turn our hearts to stone. Instead, giving away some of our resources each time reminds us that we're really stewarding God's resources, we're reminded that God provides for us, and we're reminded that God demands mercy even to those we may think are undeserving.

### **We Assume Giving is About Material Goods**

Most are familiar with the saying, "Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime." It's a wonderful and true saying and we love applying this to giving. The modern view of efficiency in giving seems to be that we don't just give things away without having all sorts of stipulations and procedures in place. We need to verify the need. We need to make sure a poor individual didn't get themselves into this situation through foolishness or vice. They need to deserve our help. We need to make sure all of our goods are used as we intend them to be used. But I wonder what this whole process does to the hearts of those who have to check all of the boxes before receiving mercy.

I think the problem here comes in with our conflation of stewardship and efficiency. We tend to believe that to be good stewards means to utilize 100% of our resources towards that which will have the greatest impact (as far as we can tell). If we give money to someone who might misuse it, our resources have not been stewarded. We must put the needy through the ringer to make sure we're getting the best bang for our buck.

Having worked with a number of individuals in need, I understand the desire to be a good steward. Many of the people who approached our diaconate were a bit shady. Plenty just made their annual rounds from church to church to get what they could. I am not at all advocating that we throw off discretion. But at the same time, I have seen what a sterile process looks like. Sterilizing the giving process may steward finances to ensure that only those who "deserve" assistance get it, but it often means we fail to steward the grace and mercy we were intended to steward. We often steward our material goods at the expense of stewarding our spiritual goods.

In all of my time on our church's diaconate, I only ever handled one mercy situation well enough that I have no reservations or regrets about it. I had spent a year or two administering questionnaires to those who approached the church with mercy needs, handing out money here and there, and not at all feeling like I was really doing "mercy"

or "ministry." But then \*Jan came into the church for assistance. Rather than just keep the ball in her court to be upstanding and pursue us, we pursued her. We visited her fiancé in jail. We picked him up from jail when he was released. We gave her some of our own personal kitchenware. We helped her get an apartment and set it up. We went shopping with her and taught her about price differences. We met her in the middle of the night when she called us in a murky situation. We helped her to look for a job. Our church diaconate, Catalina, my family, and another deacon and his family really came behind this woman in so many ways, Yes, we had limits on our funding and we did have some expectations for Jan, but we pursued her hard. We gave her the benefit of the doubt and we paid some bills for her to start, but we were all in relationally. It was exhausting, frustrating, depressing, and very hard. And in the end, Jan ended up relapsing and going off the deep end. Some might say we wasted resources. but I know that Jan not only received needed material goods to sustain her and her family while we helped, but more importantly she saw the love and grace of Christ Jesus through us. We were not stingy with our mercy and grace. We may have ended up spending more material resources on her because we lead with mercy and grace, but there is no doubt in my mind she saw the gospel. She knows she can come back to us at any time and we will love her. Sadly, I can't say the same about any of the others who came to me in need through the church. While I did choose to give others resources for their situation, I only ever lead with mercy and grace once. In the end, leading with the notion of being efficient with our money may often mean that we are hoarding mercy and grace, and stewarding none of the above.

[If you want a little glimpse of some of the people with whom our diaconate interacted, you can check out my writing about it at the "[Perspectives](#)" series. You can see the beginnings of my inner dialogue about what it means to love people and the difficulties of certain situations.]

### **We Assume Giving's Efficiency is Measured by Functionality**

Matthew seems to view giving as a spiritual discipline. Giving involves the helping of others with material, but the discipline of giving is meant for so much more than that. It's meant to reorient us towards God. It's meant to help us conform to Christ's image. If there is one thing that Christ is clear about, it is that our conformity to him often comes through suffering. A true Christian is called to put himself or herself in positions that will likely lead to their suffering or abuse. Stories abound of Christians taking in orphans, loving and taking care of the sick, not bowing to Caesar or other gods, and loving their enemies. Jesus himself told us that we are to love our enemies, turn the other cheek,

not take brothers and sisters to court, and go the extra mile. We are called to bear our crosses in love towards others. Choosing a road that knowingly leads to the bearing of a cross and joyfully submitting to that path can help to amplify the love, mercy, and grace of Christ as seen in our example. Being willingly vulnerable, enduring abuse, and pursuing in love even those who afflict us is taking up our cross and representing Christ in the most tangible way possible. While I'm not at all saying we have to be unwise or we have to seek martyrdom, I am saying that we should count our lives as nothing in the pursuit of loving others as Christ did - self-sacrificially.

What does that mean for our helping of the poor? It means that the giving process isn't meant to be a safe bet. It's not meant to be a process centered around functionality. Our main job isn't to figure out what "works," because the means God prescribes are almost always in opposition to our definition of functionality and efficiency. God's means are foolish means that lead (at least in the human mind) to suffering and death. Giving is a means that fits this notion of foolishness. Not only is giving unsafe in the sense that if we are truly giving generously, we will be giving from the depths of our resources rather than hoarding and saving them for pleasure and security. Giving is unsafe because of the abuse we may face from others. The types of people who truly need our help are often on the fringes of society and have often developed habits or traits that may put us in danger, or they may live in an area that presents us with danger if we meet them where they're at. Giving is risky. I know that I've been lied to, cheated, manipulated, and verbally abused by those who I've helped. But even though giving is a foolish means that presents us with the likely potential to suffer, how powerful is it to humble yourself, willingly walk towards a situation that may lead to your suffering, yet choose pursue in love?

We are dealing with that current situation even as we speak. We have been hanging out with a woman, \*Alexa. We've been providing her work for pay, and have also been giving her food, clothes, and other household goods each time she comes to work and sometimes in between. While we have continued to help her without prying much into the legitimacy of her needs, she has continued to relay to us a more tragic story each week. Originally the story was that her husband died just a few years back and she has five kids. The next week it was that her daughter was a little sick in the hospital. The following week it was that her daughter had a heart issue. Now, her daughter is in a coma and needs an expensive heart transplant. While all of this could be true, Alexa says she needs some items for her daughter - items her daughter couldn't use in a coma, and Alexa says she has already used the huge package of paper towels we've given her

in just one week. This, as well as a number of other things scream that we're being manipulated.

I think it would be wrong of us to continue being knowingly manipulated. That's why Catalina called her out on some of the things. Alexa knows that we think she's trying to manipulate us. But we began by giving to her in good faith, and when she returns on Thursday for work, we'll let her in and invite her to sit down for some coffee before she begins. We'll love her and push back where we think she may be trying to manipulate us, but that won't stop our generosity or love. We want Alexa to begin understanding that our love for her and our generosity are not based on her circumstances. She doesn't need to manipulate us. In fact, we won't allow it. But we also won't allow any of our misperceptions and misattribution of motives, or her mistakes and manipulation to restrict us from love, mercy, and grace.

I don't think a Christians measure of success in giving can be efficiency as measured by how many resources go to "legitimate" needs and how effectively those resources facilitate the growth of individuals to prevent future material poverty. Giving is not a sure thing. When we give organically, we often can't be sure of how our resources will be used. While Catalina and I never give out money (unless it's for a job), we can't guarantee that our resources aren't being sold. We can't perfectly know the truthfulness behind someone's claimed need. When we invite needy individuals into our home, we can't guarantee that they won't take anything of value. We can't guarantee they won't swipe a house key to use later. We can't guarantee they won't attack us. When we give, we can't guarantee that our giving will be the provision or catalyst that boosts someone out of poverty. Our measure of success can't be the avoidance the unknown and of bearing our cross and experiencing suffering. Yet we Christians often attempt to limit our vulnerability with those who need to see it most - those who themselves are so vulnerable. Perhaps the placing of ourselves in situations where we may be taken advantage of is sometimes the right thing to do. That doesn't mean we allow others to take advantage of us or to continue taking advantage of us, but it does mean we may need to give trust before faithfulness is proven. And it certainly means that we continue to pursue relationship when we are wronged and when things get tough.

**Conclusion:**

It is a wonderful thing to push back against the curse in this world and it is a wonderful thing to pursue wisdom and apply it to this battle of poverty. But it is also a wonderful

thing to embrace the foolish means of God as we seek to grow in our own relationship with him and as we seek to share this love with others. I don't at all know where the line is between being wise and discerning stewards or being foolish and wasteful. I don't know where the line is between being stingy and sterile legalists who kill love and the heart of giving and being trusting servants of God's resources who can loose their grip not only of their goods, but of their control over circumstances. But what I do know is that for my heart, to always say "no" to organic giving is spiritually repressive. I can always find a reason someone isn't deserving and an excuse for why my resources could more efficiently be used elsewhere. It's not hard for me to seek the seat of judgment when it comes to another's worthiness. It is so easy for me to be dismissive of those in need as undeserving. Maybe my thoughts here are a pendulum swing and some of my giving is tainted by inefficiency. Maybe my giving in some way encourages the systemic poverty to continue. But the risk of encouraging poverty's continuation through the small gift of milk and eggs seems worth it to me when compared to the risk of the poor never encountering love, mercy, grace, and pursuit from those who horde and withhold them. The risk of encouraging the continuation of poverty seems better to me than risking the corruption of my soul through greed, judgmentalism, and a desire for control. Even more than this, the risk of encouraging the continuation of poverty seems better to me than being miserly with grace and mercy, and becoming a millstone around my children's neck as they watch the way I begin to resent those in need and withhold myself from them. Better for my children to see us lavish the undeserving and relinquishing our own resources than to have them see us horde and defend. If I'm going to err, I want to err with material goods and not precious souls.

I'm sure the right answer lies in the middle of efficiency and immediacy. There are likely times where one is more appropriate than another, and it is surely wrong to never be open to the Spirit's leading. That's what I've come to find out about mercy ministry over the past few years. It's this weird, dichotomous mire that leaves you with more questions than answers. I've never second guessed myself so much in my life. But I've never had something grow me so much either. I continue to learn more about my need for God and his grace and generosity towards me. Please pray for us as we face this question of giving often, sometimes on a daily basis. Pray for the hearts of those with whom we come in contact, and pray for our hearts as well.

## Appendix 15: Cheap Grace

<https://www.dckreider.com/blog-theological-musings/cheap-grace>

### **"Ce e bun, e rar."**

That which is good, is rare. I was introduced to this Romanian phrase the other week at Bible study, when our Romanian leader for that week put this idea forward and asked whether everyone agreed with the statement. Such a statement seems true on its face. Yachts, diamonds, vintage wines, and front row seating at a concert are wonderful things, but extremely rare. They're something you savor when you experience them, and often pay a high price to obtain them. The more magnificent something is, the rarer and harder to obtain it will be.

For the most part, all of us agreed with the phrase. While I typically shy away from universal statements, it at least seemed generally true. It does seem like the best things are rare. After discussing the Romanian phrase, our leader then asked a tough follow-up question. "If the love and grace of God is so wonderful, how could it be so plentiful?" The implication, of course, was that if God's love was so amazing, it would be rare and difficult to obtain, but we know that God's love is endless and readily available. Our leader pointed out that a grace like that presented in the gospels seems like something that would devalue itself. Flooding the spiritual market with grace, like flooding the economic market with money, would make the value, wonder, and power of grace diminish. I appreciated this question, as our Romanian leader had grown up with a very strong emphasis on merit. This notion of free, unmerited grace was new to him. It seemed like he found it interesting and compelling, but couldn't figure out how such a thing could be real.

Logically, it is difficult to push back against the ideas our leader brought up. I and some others gave off-the-cuff responses that were fine, but I didn't feel as though we really answered the question. I knew that the Apostle Paul indicates in Romans 6 that sin does not increase with sin and the value of grace does not diminish under the power and limitless availability in God, but I couldn't explain how that wasn't the case. I've been considering these ideas now for the past several weeks and think I've come to a few conclusions which have helped me parse through this issue - an issue which I, as an Evangelical Westerner steeped in the teachings of grace, never really worked out.

### **1. Actually, grace is rare**

We can determine whether something is rare in at least three senses: abundance,



accessibility, and frequency of occurrence (which I will distinguish from "abundance"). I think grace seems common to us because it is both infinitely abundant and infinitely accessible. God's grace is deep enough for the worst sinner who has ever lived, and it is available to any human who desires a relationship with God. In those senses, grace is not rare. However, we know that God's grace is not accessed with great frequency. Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved, and he told us that the path leading to destruction is very wide. God's grace may be available to everyone, but because of the self-focused human condition, few people access God's grace.

In this regard, God's grace reminds me of saffron. My grandma used to grow saffron - a substance worth hundreds of dollars more per pound than gold. I remember first learning about the price of saffron and asking my grandma why everyone didn't just grow it and get rich. She invited me to experience the saffron growing process with her. It was extremely laborious. We dug up all of the saffron bulbs and sorted the good from the bad. We replanted thousands of bulbs in just the right location to ensure they would grow. When it came time to harvest – many months later - we went around to the thousands of bulbs and picked three or four little hairs of saffron off each flower that bloomed from a bulb. We were lucky if we got four ounces from a few thousand flowers. On average, it takes 35,000 bulbs to produce one pound of saffron. 35,000 flowers and bulbs - over 100,000 saffron hairs - all for a \$1,500 return.

I think grace is like saffron. The idea of it is wonderful. It can make you wealthier than you could ever imagine, and the process is really quite simple. But it is laborious. If you want to get rich in it, it must change your life. Truly accessing grace makes a rich man willing to sell all his possessions. It makes a coward and betrayer like Peter willing to die a horrific death. God's grace may be free, but the effects of its transformative power may cost us everything. Most people don't grow saffron because it's hard. It would change how they structured and lived their lives. Most people don't accept God's grace for the very same reason. In this sense, grace is rare.

## **2. The best things are rare, but the necessary things aren't**

It may be true that yachts, diamonds, vintage wines, and front row seats are both rare and expensive. In fact, you could likely make a list of the greatest objects, pleasures, and places in life and find that every single one of them were rare and/or expensive. But what you would also find is that every item on that list could be eliminated from existence for the rest of eternity, and life would go on. In fact, one could live a very good life without these rare things.

What one couldn't live without is food, water, and air. One might actually consider these to be the best things because they are necessary things. Without them, one cannot live long enough to enjoy anything else this life has to offer. Food, water, and air are the best things, yet they are also the most ubiquitous things. They fit all the categories of being common. They are numerous, easily accessible, and frequently used.

One might argue that grace is more like the necessary things. Without grace, our connection to the life-giving creator and sustainer of our being is severed. Without grace, we're merely "breathing to death," as Lecrae says. Grace mends our relationship with God, and even through our continued failure, maintains that relationship. Without God's grace, our lives are empty and meaningless pursuits of momentary pleasures. Grace isn't a yacht, it's the air we breathe.

### **3. Grace can't increase - only it's manifestation can increase**

I think it's wrong to look at grace as a commodity which can be increased or decreased. While Paul does bring up the notion of grace increasing in Romans 6, I would argue that he is speaking in terms of its manifestation. When we sin, there is an opportunity for grace to be applied - to show itself. But if you think about it, this isn't increasing the amount of grace. The full amount of God's grace was procured at the cross (and I think John Owen would agree with me on this). On the cross, Jesus graced all believers past, present, and future, with the full amount of grace possible. Nothing greater could be given or done. When we sin, then, the grace we receive is not an influx of more grace into the system, but the manifestation (or application) of grace that already exists. When we sin, Jesus is not crucified again. Rather, God graciously applies the work of Christ, done once for all, to our offense. Sin is not an opportunity for re-crucifixion, but rather the opportunity for the revelation of the crucifixion that was.

One might be able to think of grace like a buffet, or like an all-inclusive resort. When you go to such a place, you pay a set price to cover your activity. If you make another trip to the buffet or if you get another drink from the tiki lounge, you don't incur more expense. Rather, each item ordered is a manifestation of your payment which provides you access to that for which has already been procured. The work of Christ procured all things. His sacrifice was sufficient for all things, though it is only efficient for those things to which it is applied. God's grace cannot grow, it can only be instantiated and exemplified in more places.

### **4. A relationship steeped in grace produces love, and love produces obedience**

Luke 7:36-50 gives us a wonderful look at grace. Jesus receives worship from a prostitute to the disdain of many religious leaders around him. Jesus goes on to explain that those who have been forgiven much, love much. Whereas the Pharisees saw themselves as guilty of little (or perhaps nothing), the prostitute knew exactly who she was. The Pharisees didn't see a need for grace while the prostitute couldn't imagine there being enough grace to go around for her. The prostitute, however, realized through Jesus the grace which was extended to her. The great grace she received produced great love. It is the same for us. The only reason we love God is because he first graced us with his love and forgiveness (I Jn.). Jesus says in Luke 7 that the more we realize this grace, the more love it produces.

Elsewhere in the Bible Jesus tells us that love, like grace, will likewise produce something. If we love Jesus, we will obey his commands. True followers of Christ are obedient to Christ. It doesn't mean they never make mistakes, but rather that as they grow in their discipleship, so they grow in their convictions, their realization of God's immense grace, their love, and their obedience. People know we are Christ's disciples by the way we love one another. In relationship, grace produces love and love produces obedience.

Does this mean that prostitutes and murderers have the ability to love God more because they receive more grace? Not at all. The problem for the Pharisee in Luke wasn't that he needed less grace from God than the prostitute, but rather that he didn't realize that the amount of grace he needed was as great as that needed by the prostitute. Sin, as Paul says, has a way of showing us our offense. Those who sin more overtly, more frequently, and in more societally offensive ways can much more easily see their sin, and therefore the amount of grace it requires to save them. "Bad" people can comprehend that they need God himself to die in their place. "Good" people, in need of the same sacrifice, can't understand how God couldn't accept them as they are.

True grace, then, does not at all produce a desire within individuals to sin more. A true recognition of grace received is always accompanied by a true recognition of one's offense in a relationship. If one aspect is taken lightly, so will the other be. But when God opens our eyes to see the greatness of our sin, he also opens them to see the even greater magnitude of his love. This love compels us not simply to proclaim his wonderful grace, but to follow and obey him. And as we follow a God who has saved us out of darkness - while we were offenders and enemies - we can't help but grow in love. And with love comes obedience.

## **5. Being graced is ultimately positional, not causative**

I think the inflationary model of grace (or "cheap grace") looks at things too naturalistically – too behaviorally. I don't think true grace is Pavlovian. True grace is something that occurs within a relationship. It is not an action used to manipulate another's action - though one's actions may indeed be affected by grace. We know that one reason we love God is because he first graced us with his love. His loving of us in our state of enmity with him - in our sin - enables us and compels us to love God. Rather than a cause/effect relationship here, though, I think it's more of a relational relationship.

As an example, if you have to go on a business trip for a few nights or if you go on a guys/girls night out for a few hours, you likely don't think to yourself, "while the cat's away the mice will play." Your absence doesn't produce some suspicion in you that your spouse is cheating on you. Your absence doesn't cause your spouse to cheat, though your absence may give them the opportunity to do so. For most of us, it would be absurd to think that our absence gives us reason to believe that cheating will occur. It's not absurd because cheating couldn't easily occur, but because our loving relationship with our spouse produces a trust within us that they will be faithful. Our spouse could cheat *if they wanted to*, but why would they want to if they are in a loving, trusting relationship which is valued?

To me, grace seems very similar to the trust depicted above. Trust naturally grows within a healthy relationship – but so also does responsibility. One gains trust as one is found to be responsible with the trust given. Most of us don't look at the gaining of trust as a greater opportunity to commit worse evils against the one who trusts us. While clandestine operatives in espionage may seek to gain trust for nefarious purposes, those in true, healthy relationships don't view trust as an opportunity to do evil, but rather a privilege to preserve. Grace is the same. Knowing that I have the opportunity to sin big and be forgiven through grace could provide me with a rationale to sin more. I get free grace, right? That type of thinking is self-centered and Pavlovian, looking simply at the cause/effect aspect of grace and the potential gain for self. But if I am in a true, loving relationship with my God - if I have made him my Lord - then how could I possibly think this way? He has entrusted his grace to me. I know that when I mess up, he'll continue to extend grace, but in no way would I ever consider taking advantage of his grace if I am in true relationship with him. His grace may make me bold and may take away my worry, as I know I will always be loved, but it in no way makes me feel as though I want to manipulate him. If grace were merely causative and didn't come in relationship, of course I would take advantage of it in order to reap the greatest pleasures for myself. But grace isn't merely causative. It's relational.

Relationship is really the main component in explaining how abundant grace doesn't produce abundant sin. While many might take free money spitting out of a broken ATM, they would likely return a money-filled wallet their friend lost at their house. Similarly, most of us aren't too concerned when some random stranger is angry with us on the road, but we are devastated when we deeply disappoint someone we love dearly. Relationship changes everything. Grace inside of a relationship allows us to be secure in that relationship, and it deepens our love and respect for that relationship even more. It in no way encourages us to harm or manipulate a true, meaningful relationship. When one is apart from relationship and focused solely on self, the question is "how can I get the most for me?" In relationship, the question is "how can I uphold this relationship?"

### **The Gates of Hell**

Right now we are walking in the midst of the very conundrum laid out above. We have been working with a Roma woman, \*Alexa, for over six months. We recently had our credit card stolen and used for thousands of dollars' worth of purchases. Rather than go to the police, we confronted Alexa. We told her we didn't know who took our card, but that we knew it was a friend since it was taken from our house. We wanted to give her the opportunity to tell us if it was her so we could work it out. We told her we didn't want to go to the police, but that we would if the friend who took the card wasn't able to confess and work with us towards restoration. Alexa confessed, we had a long talk (and will be having many more) about the process of restoration. After our talk, we gave her a bag of food and made her a meal to take home to her family. She couldn't believe that after we found out what she did, we would pay her for her work, send her home with food, and make a meal for her and her children. She has experienced grace.

I'm not exactly sure what appropriate grace looks like. We've already dealt with several financial issues and lies with Alexa before. Have we reached our 491st time to forgive? Is it possible to reach an end of forgiveness and grace? I don't think we ever reach an end to forgiveness, mercy, and grace. However, showing grace doesn't mean the elimination of consequences. Don't forget that the grace we receive isn't free. It was procured at a very hefty price – the life of God's own son. Sometimes grace means that we, the offended party, eat the cost of the offense. We know Alexa can't pay back in full what she stole. However, our giving of grace doesn't mean that Alexa doesn't have to bear any burden. Just as God's mercy and grace often don't liberate us from all of the natural consequences of our sins (broken relationships, jail, STD's, etc), so it is at times when we extend mercy and grace. The road to restoration is often long and costly.

Some may say that such an extension of grace towards Alexa is too much. If we continue to show mercy, grace, and forgiveness, aren't we just perpetuating Alexa's sinful lifestyle? Aren't we just enabling her and affirming her in her bad actions? Perhaps. But whether we are instruments of God used to heap up judgment on Alexa or instruments of God used to bring Alexa to himself, it is none of our concern (though of course we'd love the latter). We are attempting to depict God's unending grace and love. We will not terminate our relationship with Alexa, though we may put up some parameters and stipulations within the relationship. Broken trust is a natural consequence of what Alexa did, but I don't know that God would ever call us to completely terminate a relationship without leaving open doors for restoration.

At the moment, we are pursuing Alexa hard and showing her that we seek a genuine relationship with her. Why she wouldn't want that, I don't know, but we understand the very real possibility that Alexa will come to view grace as Pavlovian rather than relational. She may come to love grace without ever loving us or loving God. We have provided her with some income. We have provided companionship, inviting her into our home to talk and drink coffee. We have given her food. We have bought her medicine for her kids. We have offered to visit her daughter in the hospital and bring her a meal. We have offered to drive her places. We have researched how to get her money from the state for her kids and offered to walk through the process with her. We have offered to help her create a resume and apply for jobs. We have offered to have her family over for meals. We have offered for her and her six kids to stay with us when she said they were being evicted from their home. We have listened to her, loved her, trusted her, forgiven her, and shown her that we are all for her, and we have explained that this is because of the gospel of Christ. Alexa would be a fool to scoff at this clearly one-sided relationship (in terms of benefits received), if for no other reason that it is likely the one place she's ever experienced unconditional love and acceptance. But until Alexa begins to understand that Jesus is the life-giving source which has procured and divvies this grace, then grace may simply just be another tool in her toolbelt.

We all know that Alexa may very well refuse to make this one-sided relationship work both ways. She may continue to seek our harm, her momentary benefit, and she may keep refusing to allow us into her life. Long-term, that's foolish. Relationally, that's foolish. But individuals are often only able to think of themselves and that which is immediate. Such myopic vision reminds me of C.S. Lewis's description of hell as being locked from the inside. God has poured out his

abundant grace – a grace which is sufficient for everyone. Yet this grace which is unmatched in both power and presence is rarely accepted by sinners. Alexa’s “hell” here on earth will likely continue if she chooses to remain in a lifestyle of sin and deception, refusing to accept healthy relationships with those who seek her good. Likewise, all sinners who pursue their own self-centered will - pharisee and prostitute alike - will one day find themselves in hell, a judgment fashioned of their own perpetual choice to refuse God. Hell is the place where God gives these individuals what they want - to be left alone in the self-created misery of their narcissistic choices, and apart from relationship with the the living God.

What could possibly break through the gates of hell which humanity builds to maintain self-rule? Jesus himself gives us the answer when he says that the gates of hell cannot withstand his hands and feet in the world, the church. It is through Christ’s grace and love manifested through the church that the principalities, powers, nations, rulers, and hearts of humanity will be conquered. While you may believe that all seems hopeless in this prescription, especially if you’ve been in any churches lately, we know that our God is able to overcome all things through the means of his choosing, no matter how foolish those means may seem. We believe that the church is central to God’s plan for salvation in the world, and that he has called the church to pursue the means of mercy, grace, and love. We pray that God would enable us to implement his means, no matter how foolish, mundane, or fruitless they may seem, and that God would prevail in the hearts of those he pursues as he draws them to himself.