

## Some Observations on Love, Teenage Life, and the Gospel

**WARNING: To Be Taken With A Grain Of Salt - I'm Just A 24-Year-Old Dude**

So maybe it's because I'm going to be a parent in few short months, or maybe it's because I spend almost every day of my present life with high school students, or maybe it's just because I tend to zone out for long periods of time in the shower, but I've been having some thoughts...Why are teenagers in America the way they are? You know what I mean. Here's what their world looks like on a daily basis, in case you've forgotten: Everyone is dying to be his or her "own person" and yet they're all bafflingly desperate for the acceptance and approval of everyone else. They HATE taking orders from authority figures, and yet they'll give their very lives in obedience to the high and holy law of "Cool". Everyone is paralyzed with insecurity, but no one's going to take their eyes off the mirror long enough to evaluate anyone else anyway! What is going on here?

Of course, there are brilliant and beautiful exceptions to the norm, even and especially among our very own students at Galilee, but still...I am compelled, in the voice of Jerry Seinfeld, to ask: What's the deal with video games? What's the deal with makeup? And how is it that unflinching debauchery and fanatical fundamentalist piety seem equally intriguing to teenagers, and for the same general reasons? Am I taking crazy pills?

### **Obligation vs. Love**

Well, I'm here to say maybe teens are getting kind of a bad wrap. Every parent knows what it's like to mention to an acquaintance that their child is "a teenager now" and receive immediate sympathy in response: "Oh, they are such a handful!" Yes they are. But isn't that kind of sad in a way? I mean, you've cared for this human being through pregnancy, infancy, the preschool years, and all of lower school; from their first step to their first word to their first science project and piano recital, and now they're finally at that age where they can begin to think and feel and act for themselves; they can see that a whole world exists *outside* of them and outside of you, and it might even make them love you more! They can see that you are you and not just a character in their story. You won't lose a son or daughter, but you could very well gain a friend and a partner in life. Wow. That is cool.

Yes, it sounds nice and all, but somehow you find yourself having to be even *more* of a disciplinarian for their teenage years than you were when they were younger. And sadly, there seems to be less and less hope for true friendship and partnership with your teenager. Likewise, have you ever met a teenager who wasn't tired of being told what to do every day? I've hardly met one who isn't daily tempted to do the exact opposite of whatever he or she is told, just because they're told to do it!

This is a fact of life that teenagers understand better than anybody. Doing things out of obligation is never anywhere near as powerful or meaningful as doing things out of true desire. Sure, people do things – important things – every day because they "have to", because it is their "duty." But the most important things in life are born out of genuine desire. You'll find this idea all over the New Testament and you'll find it in every day life. An officer's orders (if he sounds scary enough) can be pretty effective in getting his men to march in a straight line. But no orders, no matter how scary will inspire them to willingly give their lives for him. There has to be something deeper. You can command, threaten, even torture someone to verbally renounce their faith in something, but you can never make them stop believing. No one can do that. In certain cultures, you can still

arrange your children's marriages (I wouldn't try it in this one!), but what you can't do is make them love one another. Love, most of all, just doesn't work that way. No one wants to receive obligatory love.

In fact, love is the opposite of obligation. That's what is so beautiful and mysterious about it. It can't be forced. It is what Martin Luther called "God's left-handed power." Right-handed power is how we do almost everything in life – pure, straight-line cause and effect. If you want that table to move, you push it. If you want that person to move, you push *him*. Seemingly everything in life works this way. God has often worked this way as well. When he was unhappy with the people of the earth he sent a flood to wipe them out. When Jesus came across the sick and the lame and the blind, he wasted no time in healing them. So this may compel us to ask the question, "Alright, if God can do all that, why doesn't he just snap his fingers and fix this messed up world once and for all?" That is not His way. Yes, He can and He *will* make everything right once and for all, but to do so, according to the Bible, he has chosen a deeper magic – one of left-handed power. We call it Love.

So what does it look like for *Love* to save the world? Well, a helpless child is born in a dirty stable. A lowly Nazarene carpenter walks around teaching, "Love your enemies...turn the other cheek...bless those who curse you...and forgive seventy times seven times." "Blessed are the poor, the meek, the hungry, and the depressed..." And at the prime of his career he willingly gives himself over to be mocked and humiliated, tortured and executed for seemingly no good reason. All is hopeless. This is how Love saves the world. And here God proves himself to be the best storyteller the world has ever known, because through death, there is resurrection! In some backwards, left-handed way, Love wins in the end. The weak become strong, the poor become rich, the last become first, the least become the greatest, and so on. Love turns the world upside down. It does what right-handed force and obligation could never do. As one of my favorite old hymns states so eloquently:

*But to see the Law by Christ fulfilled  
To hear His pardoning voice  
Changes a slave into a child  
And duty into choice*

## **Playing Telephone**

This is the shockingly good news of the Christian message that everyone longs to hear, but somehow few people ever hear it, and hardly anyone seems to embrace it as reality. If we did, we'd be throwing rowdy parties in the sanctuary and inviting every bum off the street to come join us. But we don't. And the "gospel" we usually accept in its place – one of religious duty and right-handed power – is really no gospel at all. It is *not* good news! It's bad news. And I think that's why teenagers are often so apathetic or even averse to the Christian religion. By the time I get to my third sentence in a Sunday morning talk, half the guys in the room are already looking at me like, "Okay buddy, we get it. We've heard this all before. Can you speed the process up a little so we can go back to giggling and pegging each other with ping-pong balls."

So after a while I began to realize that every time I was excitedly talking about this radical God who came not to condemn the world but to save the world, who humbled himself to skin and bones and gave Himself away so that we might be set free, none of it was registering because

everyone had already come well-equipped with their own versions of the story and their own understanding of who God is. And like I said, their versions are NOT good news. From what I can tell, most of our current American youth are growing up with two distinct theological flavors of Christianity, which often times work together to guard teenagers against ever hearing the true gospel. The first may be labeled, "Being A Person of Integrity." The second, "Developing Your Potential." Both, of course, appear to be biblically grounded, and both are easy ideas to defend in our modern American society, but unfortunately, neither is particularly Christian. Both create the illusion of freedom and love, but in actuality lead to hopelessness or worse, delusion. Now I realize this is an offensive thing to say, since most all of us have become accustomed to these views, but nevertheless, let me explain.

Let's begin with the first idea first: "Being A Person of Integrity." If you're an American, it is likely that you have been brought up with a thorough blend of Moralism and the Christian message, so that the two appear to be one, or at least to be in ultimate agreement. And in a lot of ways this makes sense. For one, we want to raise our children with values. We want to teach them to do good and to refrain from doing evil. And of course, as Christians, we want to bring God and the gospel into the picture. But this is where things get shady. In fact, God and Moralism are not one. Moralism and the Gospel aren't even in agreement. They are opposed. This is actually one of the most important ideas in the New Testament. As St. Paul explains, the law brings condemnation to all, while the gospel brings liberty to all. We can meet in our accountability groups and talk about being "men of integrity" all we want, but more than half of us will still be looking at pornography when get home and on average, one of us is having an affair. We will never measure up. And unless we believe the gospel, or figure out a really good coping mechanism, we will always live in fear of judgment. A friend of ours teaches first grade at a Christian school and recently caught one of her students cheating on an assignment related to the Bible. She brought the student out of the room and asked her if she knew why she should not cheat. Her answer: "Because I'll go to hell."

The second, "Develop Your Potential" or, for the true churchgoers, "Develop Your Potential in Christ" seems to be more of a modern American phenomenon. Whether in Borders or in the local church bookstore, self-help books are selling like hotcakes, with tantalizing titles such as, *Become A Better You*. Who doesn't want that? In the secular realm, of course, this philosophy is screamed into your teenager's life on a daily basis. Everything is about developing your potential. You work hard to get the grades to have the resume to go to the school to get the grades to have the resume to go to more school to get the grades to have the resume to get that job on Wall Street. Every goal and purpose in your life is toward your own personal success. And then when they go to church, often times they find the exact same thing! It's communicated a bit more graciously, but still, in church you find that it is God Himself who is waiting for you to achieve your full potential. What an incentive. God always wants you to become a better you. So here's how these ideas play themselves out practically...

A couple of months ago, we put together a "Sex and Dating Seminar" at Hannah and I's house, where students could come submit their questions anonymously. We promised to do our best to give some biblical answers, and at the very least facilitate healthy discussion on the topics at hand. Now, as you might imagine, the most common question that we received was some variation of, "How far is too far?" i.e. What level of physical intimacy with a guy or girl is acceptable to God? Now, do you see how deeply rooted in the two above theologies this question is? First, it is presumed that God, like Santa Claus, is keeping a record of wrongs and rights, on which he will ultimately base his acceptance or rejection of you, according to your merit. Second, it is presumed

that in order to be a good Christian, you should be keeping track of your own personal piety in your quest to develop your potential in Christ. Aside from the fact that I'm pretty sure God is neither Santa nor your personal piety trainer, the main problem here is that the word "love" has not once entered the picture. It never does in Christian dating conversations, to my knowledge, which is strange. Because if we simply had the thought, "It is God's desire that I love this other person as I love myself," we would have way fewer questions about the moral boundaries. We might even have some clarity regarding the fact that life is meant to be about more than just me.

But of course we've been brought up our whole lives to think certain things about God and Christianity, and you can't just turn them off at the drop of a hat. I have discovered that whenever I say the word "God" in a youth group meeting, no matter what I'm trying to communicate, it will pass through one of these filters before reaching home. It is inevitable. My words go through their brain as if passing through a giddy line of children playing the game "telephone" at recess. I say, "God is Love," and it comes out on the other end as, "God is the ultimate parental disciplinarian." Perfect. I tell stories of God heroically invading space and time in the person of Jesus Christ to take our burdens upon himself and set us free, and all that comes out on the other end is some variation of Bette Midler's early nineties classic, "God Is Watching Us From A Distance." And they're thinking, "Somebody get me out of this #@\$\$% church immediately. Not in five minutes; right now!" And that's what I'd be thinking as well. It's like being vaccinated with a mild case of religious Christianity so that you will never catch the real thing. Teenagers are tired of church because they're tired of hearing that. They're not sure about God, because their view of God is a strange combination of a sinister judge, an unsatisfied parent, an overzealous football coach, and maybe a little Stuart Smalley thrown in for good measure. So I say, let them rebel, because there's nothing there that is true enough to respect. Let them rebel against all "Gods" that are not God, that they might actually meet Jesus in their moment of greatest need.

With all its complexities, the Bible is particularly hospitable to those with questions about the character of God. It says, in effect: "Hey, if you'd like to know who God is, look at this guy, Jesus. He is it." This is crucial. God cannot and will not be anything to us other than endless moralistic chains, until we encounter Jesus. Religion cannot and will not be anything to us other than an endless battle between our self-hatred and self-righteousness, until we encounter Jesus. Our own views of God will always bounce us back and forth between a paralyzing fear of condemnation, a hopeless obsession with being "good enough," and a deluded tendency to look down on everyone else. But Jesus brings you out. He is pure joy, pure freedom, and pure Love. As St. Paul writes, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ...was not 'Yes' and 'No,' but in Him it has always been 'Yes.' For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ." In a sea of No's, Jesus is the Yes we've been longing for our entire lives. In an age where, as Alan Jones, an Episcopal Dean in San Francisco once put it, "everything is permitted and nothing is forgiven," Jesus Christ is true freedom.

### **Freedom from Narcissism**

But alas, all of us – not just our teenagers, but all of us – at some level still think of God as the ultimate score keeper of our moral and professional status, and we begin to truly believe: God = SLAVERY. Doing what I want = FREEDOM. When in fact, the exact opposite is true. Doing what I want = SLAVERY. God = FREEDOM. Doing what I want = HELL. God = SALVATION.

The only thing on earth to which I am helplessly bound is myself. I don't *get* to do what I want sometimes. I *have* to do what I want all the time. I can't help it. I can't crawl outside of my skin even for one lousy moment to consider something else above myself, to love someone else more than myself. I don't have the ability. We all long to be in love, to find our identity in something bigger than just self-preservation and self-service, but we just can't help ourselves. We are self-addicts at the core. We are slaves to ourselves. But the gospel is freedom to love. The gospel is the 'something bigger'. It is the epic true story in which we get caught up, the promised land in which we find our true identity and are finally able to love like we have never loved before. We love our friends, we love our spouse, we love the poor, the lonely, the diseased, even the criminal. We love the world, because we believe the GOOD NEWS that God "is making all things new."

We've been studying the Gospel of Mark for most of the year in our Sunday morning class, and just recently we came across one of those awkwardly offensive statements of Jesus (there are quite a few, but this one's up there):

*"For whoever wants to save his life will lose, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."*

So before we even attempted to discuss such a seemingly backwards statement, I posed a few questions to our High School students and asked them to answer, each on a personal basis. Then as they did I wrote each of their answers up on the giant easel pad so we could all see. The questions were as follows (please forgive the cheesiness): "If you could do anything with your life, what would you do?" "What would it look like for your dreams to become reality?" "What would it mean, specifically, for you to feel free?" So they answered, and at the end we had quite a list of answers on the board – some were completely ridiculous (as usual), but the majority were serious, I think. The most common answers were career dreams - dentist, doctor, artist, astronaut, professional surfer (of course), and the second most common were recreational dreams – travel the world, surf the world, live by the beach, explore Australia, etc...But here's the point: Out of all the answers given – not a single person, for any of their three answers, mentioned anything directly relational in nature.

Then I proceeded to tell a story about a friend of mine who has been asking herself some similar questions, as she is about to graduate from college. She's been weighing job opportunities, travel destinations, further education, etc., but the thing she keeps coming back to is the fact that she's totally in love with her long-time boyfriend and she really just wants to be with him and get married, and from there she's hoping the rest will fall into place. Meanwhile, every friend and family member she's ever known is coming out of the woodwork telling her that she should really, "Pursue your dreams before you get settled down in marriage." "Take some time to do what *you* want." "Have fun for a little while. Once you settle down and have kids there's no going back." "You should really pursue your career while you can, so that you have lots of options once you get married." "You've got the rest of your life to be nailed down in marriage. This is your last chance to be free." Sounds like decent advice.

Wait a minute. Think of every story you've actually wanted to know the ending to. There is no novel that ends with, "And finally he attained the lofty goal of traveling the world alone and giving himself entirely to his own entertainment." There is no chic flick that ends with, "And she finally got her dream job on Wall Street." Seriously, deep down we don't really want to spend the rest of eternity in helpless narcissism. No one wants to wake up a fifty-year-old man playing Guitar Hero

18 by himself on the couch. Everyone longs to be a part of something bigger and farther reaching than just himself or herself. Everyone wants to be caught up in something more meaningful than self-absorption. Girls love chic flicks because they're about girls falling in love. EVERYONE wants to be in love. Guys love dude flicks because they're about dudes who are willing to give their lives for a greater cause, for a girl, or for their country. These things excite us because it's what we were made for. We were made to give ourselves away. We were made to be in love. We were made to get caught up in something bigger than ourselves, that is, in the Kingdom of God. And there we are finally delivered from self-loathing and self-addiction, completely alive, and completely at home.

## **Conclusion**

One last thought. The infamous "self esteem" issues that plague our teens today do not come about because they have too little confidence in themselves, but rather because they've been led time and time again to put their confidence in empty things. Like everyone else, they long to find their worth and their security in relationship – to be loved and to be in love. But for too long, we've been feeding their insecurities with false and shallow mantras about "believing in yourself," and combating their rebellions with monotonous exhortations about "developing your potential." Needless to say, the effect has almost always been the opposite of what we intended. Only Love sets you free. Everything else falls short.

You can tell your daughter that she is beautiful and the thought may stick with her until the next time she opens a fashion magazine. You can tell your son you are proud of him and it may stick with him for a while, until the next time he does something really stupid. Give them one "Yes", and they'll find a sea of "No's" that will make them forget what "Yes" even smells like. But find something bigger – a storyline that is good and hopeful and perfect and true – and tell them that they are right smack dab in the middle of it; show them that there is a "Yes" out there which no "No" will ever overcome; tell them and show them that Love is real, that God is Love, and that Love never ever, ever, ever gives up until it has its way with every last broken detail of this planet...and then they will know who they are. They will know that they are children of a loving Father, servants of a perfect King, citizens of the eternal City of God, patriots of this world, and lovers of all creation. Self-esteem shmelf-esteem. The days of enslavement in fantasyland are over. Reality has begun.