

We Have This Hope

Another day, another mass shooting.

Another day, another senseless act of violence and unspeakable evil.

How do we respond when the world around us feels like it is collapsing in front of our eyes? How do we react when evil seems to triumph every day? Every hour? Every minute?

We are confronted with an almost unrelenting surge of evil – a tidal wave of horror stories and despicable acts. Acts that pierce our hearts with a bone-wearying sadness. Acts that just keep coming, over and over. We feel so overwhelmed, so broken, and so alone, that we feel nothing at all.

Or maybe that is just my response. I hesitate to speak for anyone else because we all process things differently, but based on conversations I have had, most of us fall somewhere within that range of emotions. We are horrified, sad, angry, and confused. We feel the onslaught of evil and we grieve. We grieve for those suffering the fullest effects of these profound demonstrations of depravity. We grieve because we feel helpless in all of it. We grieve because we know this level of wickedness is not something that can be contained by laws, regulations, or rhetoric. We grieve because our ability to grieve is slowly dying.

Where does this leave us? As the church, what should our answer be to the question of this great evil? From what I can see, we feel so very small in all of this. We feel alone and isolated. We are islands surrounded by darkness and death. To paraphrase one of my favorite films, *The Two Towers*, “What can we do against such reckless hate?”

I have many more questions than I have answers. I have no perfectly crafted words that will allow any of this to make

sense, to hurt less, or to move us more. What I have is likely insufficient, but as I have thought about all this over the past few days, and at various times prior to the most recent tragedy, I keep coming back to a few truths that have helped me. Perhaps they can help others as well.

I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.

I never want to tell someone how they should react to anything and I hope I am not doing that now. That said, when the next random act of wanton violence occurs, even if I am numb from all the previous atrocities, I know I should be moved in some manner. Now, that will likely look different for me than it does for anyone else, but as a child of the King, it is my call to be like my Father and my Father is deeply moved when evil seems to rule the day. God grieves for the broken, the hurting, and the neglected. He champions the orphan and the widow (Psalm 147:3, Psalm 34:18). His example should move me to care, to respond, and to grieve, even when I don't feel like it. Even when I have been desensitized to the evil in our midst. I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.

Perhaps you are like many I have spoken to who feel so battered by the constant stream that you cannot seem to really care anymore. I've been there and in some ways, I am still there. One thing that I have noticed with my response, is that it is much more spiritually rewarding to avoid finger-pointing in the wake of a tragedy. I feel less and internalize less when I spend all of my energy blaming this person or that, this group or that, this worldview or that. I'm not saying there are no people, groups, or worldviews responsible for many of the most heinous acts we are witnessing. I'm simply stating that when I only point fingers at the monsters outside of my gate, I cloak myself in self-delusion and self-

righteousness. For each of us, “there but for the grace of God go I” should be a constant refrain. We are all capable of great evil. We are all susceptible to giving in to our fallen nature. That knowledge should spur us to repentance, thanksgiving, and grace. We shouldn’t hate those that do evil. We should mourn that sin has disfigured the image of God in their lives almost beyond recognition. We should long for renewal – of those that do this great evil but also of the world itself. These tragedies are stark reminders how far from the Kingdom the fallen world truly is and it should be our ever-present mission to bridge that gap.

Prayer should be our first response.

Secondly, we need to pray. In today’s culture, that sounds so weak and inadequate and there are many who have responded with animosity and derision to calls for prayer. To the world at large, prayer is synonymous with naïveté and inaction, when the opposite is actually true. To a believer, prayer should be our first response. Our first defense. Our greatest and most powerful weapon. (I Chronicles 16:11, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Jeremiah 29:12, Matthew 5:44)

Prayer does not always come easily to me. Or better said, my prayer life is too self-focused and too limited. If you are like me and are active in your local church, you hear prayer requests often. I commit to pray for these requests and I almost always follow through. But my prayers are usually quick, little, one-and-done affairs. I fail, time and again, to go boldly to the throne of God with those requests. These times of tragedy remind me how flawed and undisciplined my prayer life usually is. I am convinced that if the body of Christ would commit to seeking the face of the Lord in an intense and focused manner, we would see God move in ways we cannot imagine. I am also convinced that we don’t pray that

way. If anything good can come from a tragedy like a mass shooting (and if you believe in an Omniscient and Omnipotent God you have to believe that He can use it for good) then perhaps believers falling on their knees in committed and fervent supplication will be the first step towards that.

We are never alone.

Finally, we are never alone. A few paragraphs back, I mentioned how isolated these events can make us feel. We see example after example of humanity hurting, killing, and destroying and it convinces us that we are alone. That there is no remnant in the land to stem the tide. That is a lie from hell itself. A dangerous and powerful lie. Do not believe it. Regardless how you feel, how things appear, you are never alone.

I Kings 19 tells us the aftermath of the Mount Carmel story. The prophet Elijah has just experienced one of the most amazing and powerful displays of God's power. Elijah challenged the false prophets of Baal and the LORD answered by sending fire from heaven to show the land who the true King of Israel was. A short time later, Elijah is by himself, hiding in a cave, and he prays to God, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." He was convinced that he was the only faithful person left. Without reading too much into the passage, I've always wondered why Elijah felt this way. The Lord responds to him and tells him that there are 7,000 others that never bowed the knee to Baal. 7,000! I don't want to sound flippant, but it sounds like Elijah needed to find himself a good church home! He felt isolated in part because he had isolated himself. There are too many in our

society that do this as well. They do not connect with a local body of believers. They do not feel the need or importance of putting roots down in a local faith community. So when tragedy strikes, of course they feel alone.

But even bigger than that, when we are disconnected from the worldwide church, we do not see how God is moving outside of our small sphere of living. We might be plugged into our local body, but we still feel cut off from the larger body of Christ. In some ways we are islands, but each of our small islands are joined together by the life-stream of the blood of Christ. These horrific acts should spur us to stronger connections, clearer focus, and more passionate action. Our light should shine brighter. Our prayers should be bolder. The importance of building the Kingdom should stand in stark contrast to the darkness surrounding us. Our lives should be a constant and unified declaration of grace, hope, and love to a broken and fallen world.

That's all I have so far. I wish I could write something that would help make sense of things. I can't. I'm still trying to figure out how to respond to the constant barrage myself. But these few things have helped me, so hopefully, they can help you. I'll leave you with the words from the writer of Hebrews. It's a powerful reassurance of our position and value to God. When life is chaos we have hope – a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. Let that be a comfort to you.

So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. Hebrews 6:18 -19

Love at First Sight

I originally wrote this about seven years ago. I meant it then and I mean it now. Usually, we try to not to publish content that is personal but without broader application. After looking over what I wrote years ago, I am struggling to find any lessons for a broader audience. This one is specifically intimate. Still, I hope people can find something in here to appreciate, apply, or discover.

“Why do I fall in love with every woman I see who shows me the least bit of attention?”

Joel Barrish, Jim Carrey’s character in the complicated and amazing film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, asks himself that very question sitting across the diner from Clementine, the colorful and delightfully free-spirited Kate Winslet. The very idea that you could fall in love like that is silly though, right? It is based on nothing but fleeting glimpses and unrealistic views of romance and love. It does not factor in compatibility, personality, or anything else of a more objective nature. He sees a woman that smiles back at him and he is smitten. Hard. I think many viewers simply wrote Joel and the rest of the film off after that. That’s too bad, because they missed a great movie. I didn’t write off Joel or the film. In fact, that line, heard very early in the film, hooked me. It intrigued me. To explain why this line had this effect on me will probably reveal more about myself than I really care to, but it is unavoidable.

I was hooked because I was Joel Barrish.

Years ago, as a single man, I did not date much. In fact, I only “dated” three women. (I use quotation marks, because I can barely classify two of those as dating relationships – we went out a few times.) Clearly, my dating game was not on

point. I was, and still am, shy. If I saw a girl and she showed me any attention at all I could picture us dating. In my mental version of things, I was charming, funny, handsome, and pretty irresistible so the odds were high she would say yes. In real life, I would not even get past pleasantries. I just didn't want to risk the rejection that might follow. I stayed safe and alone on the outside. All of that changed in the summer of 1996.

I was meeting a college friend for a Cardinals' baseball game and for some reason still unknown to me, he wanted to meet at the stadium hours before the game started. Summers in St. Louis can get pretty hot, and it was not a comfortable experience, but it did give me the opportunity to meet his friends, one of whom was a beautiful, friendly, Missouri girl who gently forced her way into my heart and mind. It was then that I had my Joel Barrish moment. I didn't fall in love with every woman I saw that showed me the least bit of attention, but I fell for her.

Hello, I love you. What is your name?

Before you roll your eyes, let me clarify. I didn't love her in the fullest sense of the word. Love is not simply a romantic feeling, even though that is part of it. Love is a choice. It is a decision. But romance, attraction, chemistry, beliefs, and a myriad of other things play into what "love" ultimately becomes in a relationship. So, while I didn't fully love her, I was smitten. Hard. I would even say that I loved her based on the limited information I had. I knew then and there that I wanted to spend every waking moment in her presence. I knew I wanted to find out everything I could about her. I knew she was so beautiful that it actually made it hard to think when I was around her. That is not hyperbole. I was basically a mute around her that first day because she radiated a beauty I could barely handle. I knew she was intelligent and funny, and she had really great taste to be a Cardinals' fan. I knew she was a Christian and she was

thinking about coming to Welch College (FWBBC), my college, in the fall. More than once that summer I prayed that God would make that possible.

We parted ways after the game. I thought about her constantly. Unfortunately, I was not the best company that afternoon at the ballpark. I did not feel well and I was frustrated with having to get to the stadium so early. Needless to say, I don't think my dream girl thought about me much.

Remember when I mentioned dating only three women? Well, I was dating one of them when I went to that baseball game. I had just started going out with a girl that worked at the same grocery store where I was employed that summer. She was nice. She really liked me. We were into the same bands and we shared many similar interests. There was only one problem: I could not stop thinking about the girl I met at the baseball game. Immediately after my second date with the grocery store girl, I got home and had one of those pitiful, sentimental daydreams about my future wife – the baseball fan. (That is totally normal, right?) I had spent one afternoon in the same ballpark as her, and that was all it took. She had captured my eyes, my mind, and my heart.

A dream come true.

Shortly thereafter, I ended things with the grocery girl. I was returning to college in Tennessee and didn't think it would be wise to try to keep things going since my heart wasn't really into the relationship anyway. The day I arrived in Nashville is a blur. I remember very little about it and what I do remember is probably not that accurate, because what happened when we arrived at the college was like something out of a dream. My brother and I pulled in and there she was – my dream girl. She was on her way to the dorm. My heartbeat went into overdrive. Questions raced through my mind: Is she here as a student? Is she here to drop off friends? Does she even remember me? She saw us, stopped, waved, and said hi. She even

remembered me! We talked for a few seconds, enough to find out that she was in fact enrolled as a student. *Praise the Maker!* We went our separate ways. She walked to her dorm room oblivious of what her presence had just done to that poor sap in the car. I, on the other hand, could not stop smiling. I promised myself right then and there that I was going to pursue her. In fact, I decided right then and there that, God willing, I would marry this girl. Ridiculous? Absolutely. Romantically hopeless? Certainly. Did I tell my friends and family about my newfound conviction? I am a hopeless romantic but I am not that crazy.

So, what was the end result of all of this? I finally asked her out and she said no. End of story.

Not really. I asked her out. We dated for a year. I truly fell in love with her.

Then she broke up with me. I was crushed. For one, it was a blow to my pride. Secondly, I truly loved her by that time. But most importantly, it rocked my world because I was absolutely convinced that we were going to spend the rest of our lives together. My early romantic dreams had solidified into complete certainty. I spent the next year in a haze. My grades plummeted. My attitude soured. I became cynical and bitter. That is, until I realized that it was out of my hands. If I was supposed to marry this girl, things would eventually work out. As soon as I came to that conclusion I was a much happier person. I was finally able to understand the breakup and moved on. Slowly she moved back into my life. First as a friend. Then gradually, as something more.

A deeper view of love.

Seventeen years ago, I married my dream girl. She has given me the best years of my life. She has blessed me with love and acceptance. She has modeled grace, forgiveness, and spiritual maturity. She has given me three wonderful boys. My life has been richly blessed by having her in it. It is everything I

dreamed of and more. My “love at first sight” has become a love of a lifetime.

It is her birthday today. The day we celebrate her life beginning. She will not want any attention, as she prefers to stay behind the scenes as much as possible, so I will end this with a simple “happy birthday.”

I love you Amy.

When God Hates the Sinner

“Our job is not to love the sinner, hate their sin, but to love the sinner and hate our sin.” (Rosaria Butterfield)



A couple of times on here I have mentioned that I do not like to communicate in clichés, especially Christian ones. The social media fad of posting memes with eight words that neatly and simplistically sum up complex political and theological topics unnerves me.

So I'm not inclined to say things like "Love the sinner, hate the sin". I'm not alone on this. Some people really do not like this phrase. But what makes this Christian cliché so unique is that people in two diametrically opposite camps have condemned it.

On one hand, there are people who feel completely ostracized by Christians and their churches. They have spoken out vehemently against this platitude because, from what I can tell, the words ring hollow and self-righteously judgmental. To them, Christians have substituted loving and humble relationship for an empty, Sunday School answer theology. The message is shouted from a distance, focused on hatred and does not square with their reality. Hating their sin is, in essence, hating them. But I confess I am still quite ignorant in this area and I cannot fully represent other people's views.

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An Exegetical Fallacy

Yet as interesting, I have read conservative Christian scholars speak out against this phrase as well. Most notably, D. A. Carson, a professor of Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School says:

One evangelical cliché has it that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. There is a small element of truth in these words: God has nothing but hate for the sin, but this cannot be said with respect to how God sees the sinner. Nevertheless the cliché is false on the face of it, and should be abandoned. Fourteen times in the first fifty psalms alone, the psalmists

state that God hates the sinner, that His wrath is on the liar, and so forth. In the Bible the wrath of God rests on both the sin (Rom. 1:18-23) and the sinner (1:24-32; 2:5; John 3:36). [1. Carson, D. A. "God's Love and God's Wrath." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (October-December 1999): 387-398.]

Let me make note that in Carson's explanation, the point is how *God* sees the sin and the sinner. The cliché is often used to how *Christians* are supposed to react to both. I am not quite as concerned with how accurate it is in either case as much as I care about understanding and listening to people and trying to communicate with genuineness and theology that is well-developed and nuanced. The Bible explained in context—and not pithy clichés—is the only thing I think should offend people. So its 'biblicalness' is not my focus here.

Instead I want to speak to Dr. Carson's point about God hating the sinner. I've read Psalm 5:5 and 11:5 many times over the years and I cannot get past the mention of God hating people and not merely sin. Same for Proverbs 6:19. And for Esau in Malachi and Romans. And so on.

So there must be some sense in which God hates sinners. At the same time, I don't think we can deny that God loves all sinners in that he wants relationship with them [2. 2 Peter 3:9] and gives them some measure of blessing [3. Matthew 5:45], among other nuanced definitions of love. We cannot state succinctly and unilaterally that "God hates sinners". Yet the verses in Psalms and Proverbs and about Esau have to mean something that keeps us just as honestly from saying "God doesn't hate sinners." Language is often too multi-dimensional and the Bible too often creates conflicting tensions in logic for us to try to capture this in meme or cliché form.

God still pursues and God still blesses but unless a person comes with the humility of a child, God rejects. In

that sense, he 'hates'.

Hate As Volition, Not Feeling

I think the resolution of the tension comes from understanding that 'hate' in both the OT and the NT means that God 'rejects in relationship'. Covenant relationship with God is a relational standing, like marriage[4. The parallels are so deep, the Hebrew word for 'hate' in Malachi has 'divorce' in its semantic range.]. God wants relationship with everyone, but he only welcomes those in who are humble enough to receive Him by grace instead of trying to earn it by works, intelligence or philosophy. God still pursues and God still blesses but unless a person comes with the humility of a child, God rejects. In that sense, he 'hates'.

Which brings me to my point. In Amos 6:8, God says, "*I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds....*" The book of Amos was written in part to express the idea that God hates pride from all peoples and will execute judgment impartially. Because pride prevents the relationship. Yet even his own people in covenant were still guilty of it. It is here that God does love the sinner and hate the sin. But to be like God, we must hate ours as well.

I'm So Humbled By How Great I Am

All the time on social media I see Christians brag on their accomplishments. From education to fitness to sports to serving the poor. I suppose there is something detached from reality about it on the internet that we feel comfortable doing it. I once noticed a comment from a professing Christ follower on my wife's Facebook that said she had lost X amount of weight and that she was "so proud of herself".

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who create disunity in churches. God absolutely hates both.

If the same person had put on Facebook that she left a child in a hot car, the reaction would have been swift and harsh. Instead, people liked the status and praised her. Let me be clear: God hates pride as much as he does the worst things humans are capable of. God finds human pride as gross, disgusting and reprehensible as the worst human acts of evil imaginable, including abuse and murder. How easily we hate the acts of terrorists who shed innocent blood yet sit in comfortable community with those with proud eyes who create disunity in churches! God absolutely hates both[5. Proverbs 6:16-19].

I confess I have used social media to pridefully promote myself so I'm not casting stones here. But make no mistake, Amos 6 tells us clearly that Israel had puffed herself up due to her accomplishments and feelings of superiority over others. And God expressed passionately that he hated it. He still does. God clearly says, *"Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth"* and teaches, *"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do, to be honored by others. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret."* Yet social media is often a breeding ground for violating these verses. Often in clever, proud-of-my-humility ways.

Why He Must Increase and We Decrease

I do not think biblically it is wrong for a Christian to ever talk about what they have accomplished. But there must be a full and significant expression of praise to God along with it. This is not something to be done for show; God says in Amos 5:21 that he hates that too. He alone truly knows the difference. He knows if it comes from a heart that understands what John the Baptist meant when he said, "A man can receive

nothing unless it has been given him from Heaven.” But before others, we must be satisfied with our good deeds being private, or else exalt God far more than the accomplishment. God will not share his glory with another. And he hates it when we try.

I’ll close with something written by Isaac Watts over 300 years ago that we desperately need to meditate on today:

*Now for the loss I bear his name
What was my gain I count my loss
My former pride I call my shame
And nail my glory to His cross*

*The best obedience of my hands
Dares not appear before Thy throne;
But faith can answer Thy demands,
By pleading what my Lord has done.*

*No more my God
I boast no more*

Learning to Love at Chuck E. Cheese’s

I wrote the majority of this post eight years ago. I used to have a personal blog where I would review movies and albums, talk about sports, and rant about bad drivers. You know...the

basics. Occasionally, I would delve into something a bit more "important." When I wrote this, I had recently been to a birthday party for a fully grown human man at Chuck E. Cheese's. Yes, you read that correctly. A grown up – an adult – chose to have their birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese's. Eight years later and I am still having problems fully processing that fact, which only reinforces in my mind the need to revisit this post. As you will see below, there is a streak of judgmental superiority running through me that needs confronting on a nearly daily basis.

I hate Chuck E. Cheese's. Hate is not a strong enough word. I loathe it in totality. It is a loud, unpleasant, wasteful, soul sucking place that is devoid of anything remotely approaching decent, let alone good. It attracts the loudest, most unpleasant, most wasteful, soulless people in the world. They come in throngs, like Uruk Hai on their way to Helm's Deep. (Nerdy Lord of the Rings reference for the uninitiated.) The patrons coalesce to form a massive, grotesque new organism that heats up the room and fouls the air with its presence. It is a destination I would not wish upon my worst enemy.

Yet I am worse. I am proud. I am arrogant. I am full of disdain. I do not love like I should. Jesus said to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and if I believe that to be true then I am not measuring up. No. Scratch that. I am face first, firmly on the ground. I haven't even started the process of measuring up. I've known for some time that I am not a people person and I joke about it regularly. "I don't like people" has escaped my lips many times. It's all said in jest, of course, but deep down a part of me knows that it is true. Pathetically true. I am a Pharisee. I am convinced of my own worth and abilities and I am blind to the valuable human life right next to me. To my eyes, that Chuck E. Cheese's patron doesn't look like much on the outside, but inside, God created that annoying person playing Skee Ball in His image. That person is eternally valuable to God. He loves them enough

that He died for them. And I look at them like they are beneath me – a waste of my time and energy!

If I am going to learn how to truly love my neighbor, then more visits to Chuck E. Cheese's* are in order. If I can love people there, I can love them anywhere.

*Perhaps your Chuck E. Cheese's is CiCi's Pizza. Or Ryan's Steakhouse. Or McDonald's. Or Walmart. You get the point. It could be anywhere.

I said "I Love You" Before the First Date (And Other Fun Facts About My Marriage)

As of May 30th, my wife Kayla and I have been married for two whole years! Look at the big brains on us! In lieu of a sappy Facebook post, I decided to share 24 of the most interesting facts about our marriage, one for each month we've been married...

In March 2014 Kayla was living in Nashville. I was living in Chicago. On March 25th, I asked her out, telling her I was coming to Nashville for Spring Break anyway (I wasn't). Our first date was to be April 13th. In the meantime, we talked every day through texting, phone and Facetime. By the time April 13th rolled around I knew she was the one I wanted to marry. Before the date I met her on campus and we sat on a swing and I told her that I loved her. I'm sure people thought (and think) that this was crazy. But she didn't run away and

she married me anyway.

While we dated and were engaged she lived in Tennessee and I in Chicago. She is from Sesser, IL and I am from Tookeydoo, South Carolina. There was a stretch of five weekends where we were together but in five different places. At one point during that stretch we walked into a Target and I thought, "I have no idea what city I am in right now."

Kayla and I were long distance from March 25, 2014 until May 7, 2015. In that time we traveled 40,000 miles to see each other via car, plane and train.

Within the span of 15 months in 2014 to 2015, Kayla finished getting licensed to teach in Tennessee, started dating me, performed several shows as Maria in a production of *The Sound of Music*, ran a half-marathon, graduated college in Nashville, got a teaching job in Hendersonville, moved to Hendersonville, started her first teaching job, got engaged to me, planned a wedding, applied and took new tests to be licensed to teach in Illinois, resigned her job in Hendersonville, got married in Sesser, moved to my small apartment in Chicago, joined a new church, moved into a bigger apartment with me in Chicago, got a teaching job in Chicago and started that job.

I am 14 years older than Kayla. I am one of the youngest grandchildren on either side of my family. She is one of the oldest. As a result I have a first cousin that is 54 and she has a first cousin that is 8.

We got engaged on Saturday night, November 1, 2014. That night USC played Tennessee in football. Two of my brothers were at the game and could not hear me when I called to tell them I was engaged because the stadium is so loud. The Gamecocks blew a 14 point lead in the last few minutes and lost. (Not that I associate that game with my engagement or anything.)

After 3 years of being together my wife knows all the random phrases I will say out loud and she often will say them before me when she knows I am about to say them. For example, if someone mentions chicken wings, she knows I will say, "TOMMY LIKEY, TOMMY WANT WINGY" from the movie *Tommyboy*.

During our wedding and reception there were several subtle references to *Seinfeld* and *Harry Potter*. We did not want to distract from the reverence of the ceremony by making them overt but true fans knew them when they saw or heard them.

Kayla and I do not celebrate Valentine's Day but instead celebrate several of our anniversaries that are significant to us (the day we got engaged, first date, etc.). Included is March 6th because it was a date before we got together where I asked her a personal question over Facebook PM and her answer was so transparent and spiritually deep I said, "I have to ask her out." Only took me 19 days to do it.

In two years I probably have done the majority of the cooking but she has absolutely done the majority of the bug killing.

For her first birthday after we got together I gave my wife a

Belle tiara and recreated the scene in *The Big Bang Theory* where Sheldon gives Amy a tiara to make up for being selfish.

I was so old when I got married that a man in my church, who had prayed for years for it to happen, gave Kayla a hug the first time he met her. I've never seen him hug anyone else in 15 years of knowing him.

During our first year of being married I was taking Kayla to school and a man with mental health problems jumped in our car when we stopped at a stop sign. He wanted me to take him somewhere but I could not understand him. I kept telling him to get out and that I'd call for help but he would not so he rode the rest of the way with us to school and then got out.

My favorite random moment from early in our marriage was on Good Friday in 2016 when we were at her parents' house. I was upstairs doing something unimportant and I could hear her downstairs playing the guitar and singing Good Friday and Easter hymns in English and Spanish.

I've never beaten my wife at *Scene It Seinfeld*. But she refuses to give me a rematch of the rematch of the rematch.

If it weren't for Facebook, I am positive Kayla and I never would have gotten together. And in the words of Kramer, "That'll make you think."

I have always hated wearing jeans but my wife wanted me to wear them so she bought me some to go out on nice dates. So I would wear jeans on the nice dates and then come home and put on some comfortable khaki pants.

After a few months of marriage I put on 40 pounds and the jeans didn't fit any more. We didn't buy any new ones.

I laugh boisterously and fall on the floor quite often but the only time I've seen my wife do it was during an episode of *Parks and Rec* where Christ Pratt as Andy Dwyer ad libs a line when Leslie is sick: "Leslie, I typed your symptoms into the thing up here, and it says you could have 'network connectivity problems'."

Marriage teaches you how self-centered you are for sure. If we are home and my wife says something from another room and I can't hear her, I get mad at her as if it is her fault. If I say something from another room and she doesn't hear me, I get mad at her as if it is her fault.

Probably the silliest fight we have had was recently when going to church and I asked if she wanted me to drop her off at the door or not, since it was a little cool outside. She said, "It's up to you," which means, "It doesn't matter". But I got mad and told her it was her decision and that I refused to decide it. But I really said that mumbling under my breath. And she asked me to speak up and so I said it very sarcastically. We both entered the church quite mad. Thankfully my wife is abnormally gracious and apologized quickly, even though it was my fault.

Speaking of mumbling, my wife's first trip to South Carolina gave her the chance to hear the Cannon men speak in our own personal garbled vernacular that only we can comprehend. My own mother can't make it out but we understand each other just fine. If you have ever heard Jeff Foxworthy talk about words in the South, you have an idea of what it sounds like: "How's ya mama an em?" "Aight." Sometimes when my dad and brother Jeremy have a conversation I'll translate for Kayla.

Occasionally, my wife will tell her story of fitness and health by posting a picture with comments to social media after an insane 30-40 minute workout. Sometimes, if you look carefully in the background, I'll be on the couch eating a whole frozen pizza from Aldi.

I really do love my wife very much and I cannot get over how much better marriage is than I even dreamed. I am sure it will get harder (with kids, maybe?) but right now the great moments far surpass the frustrating ones.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, KAYLA!

Social Justice Beyond Social Media

[Author's Note: This article originally appeared on REO in January of 2017 under the title "For God So Loved the Poor: Social Justice As More Than Serving".]

It never really was supposed to be Radical...

It's become a fad the last decade or two in mainstream American Christianity, and you can see it all over Facebook and Twitter.

The phrase "social justice" has entered the Christian vernacular in the mainstream and has helped form programs, ministries and how we communicate via social media. You do not have to read the Bible carefully to get why this is a good thing; the teaching to love the poor, widow, orphan and immigrant is in literally every section and genre. God said in the law that there should be no poor among the Israelites and to love the immigrant "as you love yourself". In narrative God exalts Ruth, a poor, widowed immigrant woman as the heroine of her book. Israel's songbook says that the man who considers the poor is blessed. God speaking through a prophet says that King Josiah "defended the cause of the poor and needy" and then asks "Is that not what it means to know me?"

Jesus said in the Gospels to love the least of these is to literally love him. And in the epistles Paul said it was always his ambition to serve the poor. Depending on how you count, anywhere from 1500 to 2200 verses in the Bible teach this.

It seems that while God loves all people, he has a special place in His heart for those who are the victims of injustice.

We have the Instagram and Facebook pictures to prove it..

Somehow this theology escaped much of Christianity for the better part of the 20th century. Now we have legions of books, internet articles, Youtube videos and blogs dedicated to this topic. And the church has responded. Sponsoring children in poor countries, visiting prisons and soup kitchens, disaster relief, speaking out on social media about racial injustice and short term mission trips have become all the rage. It has become somewhat of a litmus test for churches these days to measure what they are doing for the disenfranchised people around them. Which is great.

The Inside Out, Upside Down Kingdom of God

Yet, I submit that social justice – truly biblical social justice – goes beyond posts and tweets and even beyond serving in the short term. One of the most convicting and sharp teachings of Christ is found in Luke 14:12-14, where he tells his listeners while at a banquet that when they invite people to their homes, they should not invite their friends, family and those who are rich, but instead to invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind.

I think Jesus is teaching something deeper than serving people with money from a distance or for a couple of hours at a time or even for a whole week. He doesn't really teach in this passage to serve. He is teaching, I think, that to love the poor we do not just *serve*, but we go even further in that we *associate*. I take from his words that when people had luncheons and dinners in his culture, they invited their social equals. As is typical of Jesus, he teaches something counterintuitive, countercultural and as inside out and upside down as could be: you should treat those society says are beneath you as though they are your family and best friends.

The Heart of the Church, Not an appendage

What does this look like for our culture? How do we go beyond just serving the poor, orphan, immigrant, etc. to associating with them? Well I think it begins with a flaw in our thinking as far as how we do church in our country. Even if we never say it this way, we far too often approach church ministry as “if you become like us, you will be welcome”. We often attend church with people who dress like us, speak in our cultural coded language, like our kind of music and get all of our inside jokes. People who do not, will feel out of place. And make no mistake, associating with the poor will be essentially impossible with this approach. And even if our churches have ministry to the poor, they may end up as a compartmentalized extension—an appendage—instead of having them as part of our DNA.

The commission has never been getting people to “come” to us but instead commanding us to “go”. The flaw is directional. We should go to them, live among them (when possible), associate with them, socialize with them and build community organically from that. Then the poor are welcomed no matter their dress or taste in music. As it was in the early church in Acts.

To give a specific example from my life, I am convinced God called me into a Spanish speaking neighborhood in Chicago to minister. I teach ESL classes to the neighborhood because it is by far the biggest need. But I have also attempted (poorly at times, just being honest) to learn the cultures and languages of my neighbors. To say it one way, teaching English is a way to serve; learning Spanish is a way to associate. This is just one example. I know that many, many people have done more that I can dream of to associate with the poor. Yet we all can do something.

Paul said people treated him as scum and refuse...what does honor mean to you?

But Luke 14:12-14 has context. Why did Jesus have to teach these people to invite the poor instead of their friends? Well vs. 7-11 explains why. The crowd at this banquet were far too concerned with being honored. They did not want to humble themselves, but wanted to be exalted. Hence they would have considered the poor far beneath them. Is it possible that we are the same? It is possible that we stop with serving a couple of hours a week or a for two weeks every summer and then go back to the safety of our world of social equals and family and churches of people just like us because we do not want to humble ourselves to associate?

But this thought is not complete in my understanding of Christianity. The other side to the context of Luke 14:12-14 is vs. 15-24, Jesus giving a parable of inviting three people to a banquet. They all make excuses as to why they cannot. And so instead Christ has them go out into the streets and invite the poor, lame, blind, etc. What could he mean by this?

Notice the three excuses the people give: they could not come because of relationships, activity and wealth. The poor are then invited, who generally do not have these things. Following on the heels of Luke 14:7-12, I think Jesus is teaching that we should associate with the poor because the very things that keep us from being poor (relationships, activity, wealth) are the very things that distract us from truly understanding our need for God. By associating with the poor, we are reminded of who we are spiritually. Luke 14:15-24 is the same exact scene as the prior verses. These things are connected.

A Beggar Showing Other Beggars...

Jesus taught that you cannot enter into his kingdom if you are not poor in spirit, the word for poor in Matthew 5:3 being the word for a person who had no resources to get money and had to beg for it. That is significant. When we value honor and consider the poor to be beneath us, we are missing the point of Christianity entirely. God is only valued correctly when we see how desperate our need for him is. Perhaps God loves the poor so much—2,000 verses worth—because they do not have anything to cloud their view of how badly they need Him. Perhaps this is why Christ repeatedly stated it is hard for the rich to get into Heaven. Relationships are necessary. Activity is great. Wealth in and of itself is not evil. But these things can and do distract us. [Note that Luke 14:25-35 is right after this, where Jesus teaches that we must hate the people closest to us in comparison to our love for Him. It's all connected.] By associating with the poor, we should be reminded of who, according to Jesus in Matthew 5 and Luke 6, is truly in his kingdom. Isn't that the point of Luke 18:9-14?

Lastly, I will add that this proves another directional mistake we make in Christianity. When we serve but do not associate, we are very tempted to think we reach *down* to serve the poor. But when serve while associating, we realize that in the Christian worldview, we reach *across*. Luke 14:7-12 teaches clearly that the Bible demands we see ourselves as equal to the poor. Because spiritually it is who we are. My ESL students want to see me as their superior as an English teacher in the US. But my faith demands I cannot see it that way. At the foot of the cross, all are poor in spirit and therefore entirely equal. And by having been to other countries where I was the minority struggling with the language, I can see myself as equal to them much more easily. Association teaches me humility.

Humility is not Goodness, It's Honesty

Other religions and philosophies teach service to the poor and even associating with the poor, but none of them start with Christianity's starting point. The rest of the world teaches that we do it to be good; Christianity teaches we do it because we are not good. Everything I do for my neighborhood in Chicago (and honestly, I am often lazy and do very little) is because I am poor in spirit and following Christ by grace.

And with that as our starting point, we can truly move beyond just serving the poor, orphan, widow and immigrant and to associating with them. Which means loving them as God does.

Dealing With the Ramons In Your Life

Do you know anyone like this?

I do. I know *lots* of people like this. But it wasn't until a conversation I had with my brother that I really began thinking about these people.

I remember it was 10 years ago, around this time. Ashley and I were talking on the phone (which is odd to think about since we only text these days) about the College Football BCS Championship and whether Florida deserved to play against Ohio St. more than Michigan or Southern Cal. And after talking

about this for a while Ashley says out of nowhere: "Do you know what someone should preach a sermon on? Dealing with the Ramons in your life."

I knew exactly what he was referring to since we both speak Seinfeld language. He was referring to the Seinfeld episode, "The Pool Guy," from the clip above. If you cannot gather it from this 30-second scene, Ramon was extremely annoying and had very low social intelligence. In a prior scene he bumps into Jerry and Kramer at the movies and awkwardly takes the seat between them even although they very obviously did not want him to do so. In a later scene he follows Jerry around all afternoon before Jerry finally tells him they can't be friends. Ashley was telling me in a way I could understand the clearest that he struggled with annoying people in his daily life.

That conversation really got me thinking. I thought about the Ramons I had in high school. I thought about the ones I had in college. I thought about the ones I've had in Chicago. It seems no matter where I've been there have always been people that have irritated me greatly. Rick Warren in his book *The Purpose Driven Life* calls these 'EGR' people: "Extra Grace Required"[1. Please know that I have little doubt that I am and have been a Ramon to other people. I know some people do not like the way I laugh. Some do not like the way I preach. Back in Bible college my youth ministry professor, James Evans, told us that there would be those people that would be hard to deal with in our future ministries. But he added that to someone else, we might be that person. That is important to remember for me.].

My personal Ramons have all been the same story. I always think I'm cooler than Ramon. I think I am smarter. I think I am better at life. And that is basically why I treat Ramon the way that I do, which is the exact opposite of how the Bible says to treat him.

I listened to Ashley's idea and about nine months later I preached a sermon about it, when I finally found passages that I felt convinced fit the topic, Romans 15:1-7 and Ephesians 4:1-6. I've preached it at my church another time since then and at several youth camps and retreats. Here is what I learned by studying these two chapters from Paul:

I need to spend time around Ramon

Here's some honesty: my greatest temptation with the Ramons in my life is not to insult them or gossip about them or mistreat them. It's to ignore them completely. To act like they are not there. To avoid their gaze at church, walk on the other side of the room to avoid their path or turn the other way in public.

But Paul writes in both of these passages that we are to bear with others in love, to build them up, and not just please ourselves. You cannot bear with someone if you avoid them. You cannot build them up from a distance. I am also convinced Paul had at least a Ramon type idea in mind as he wrote some of these verses because of the verbs he used. You don't "bear with" people you get along with, at least not generally. You do not need to be told to be humble and gentle unless you are tempted not to be. Ramon is the greatest application of these verses to my life. Because my attitude toward Ramon, better than just about anything else, shows how prideful I truly am and badly I can treat others.

I remember a time in my past when a guy who desperately needed the interaction of a male mentor asked me to go fishing with him. The morning we were supposed to go, I overslept because I didn't care enough to set my alarm. I remember another time being on a bus for a middle school field trip that I was helping chaperone as a volunteer. The only seat left on the bus when I got on was next to the loudest, most obnoxious kid

in the class. It was no coincidence that he was alone. I sat next to him. He tried to make conversation but I was curt with him. Finally, I turned my back on him to talk to the cooler kids in other seats.

The amount of times I've ignored the Ramons in my life is astronomical. This is quite often a sin of disobedience.

How I treat Ramon is an issue of Christian Unity

This has overlap with the previous point. In Ephesians 4 Paul uses the word "one" over and over to describe Christian unity: one Father and Lord, one faith, one baptism. In Romans 15 he says we glorify God with "one heart and voice."

Yet we find every possible way we can to divide the church in the U.S. We divide by race and ethnicity. We divide by music preference. We divide based on things—and people—we find annoying.

Even within the church we divide ourselves from the Ramons. I recall several years ago taking 13 people from our church on a mission trip to Mexico. Before our trip, we drove up to Wisconsin to have a team-building retreat. During one exercise I had them randomly line up on a three-inch wooden beam. Then, I told them to rearrange themselves in order of their birthdays without leaving the beam or touching the ground in any way. After many hours, they did it. We then met and discussed what we had learned. One person said the exercise forced her to talk to people in the group she never talks to. That hit me like a hammer. Here we were a group from a church of 75-100 people, only 13 of which were going on this trip...and yet some people never had never talked to each other.

Jesus prayed against Christian division in John 17. He died to unite the church according to Ephesians 2:11-22. He died so that Ramon's would never be ostracized. Yet, they often are.

What if to Jesus, I am Ramon?

After clamoring for us to love those in the church who are weaker than we are and making pleas for us to be completely unified in mind and voice, Paul in Romans 15 nails the point as hard as he can with these words: "Accept each other, then, just the way Christ has accepted you."

Christ accepted me when I was a failure of a student and person my sophomore year at USC, taking sleeping pills every night because my life was so messed up. Christ accepted me even though I was hooked on pornography. He accepted me even though I was lazy and selfish. He accepted me even though I lived as though God didn't matter at all. I'm sure at least in some manner of speaking, to God, *I* was Ramon.

So why don't I accept Ramon with that kind of grace? Why do I judge him so much? Why do I treat him as though he were invisible and meaningless instead of a wonderful being created in the image of God?

I think the key resides in how much I forget how much Jesus loves me.

Leading up to the command that we need to "bear with one another in love" in Ephesians 4, in the first chapter of Ephesians Paul says that **"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us."** Then in chapter 2, **"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in your sins...For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."** And in Chapter 3: **"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 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.”

THAT is the context leading us to Paul writing in chapter 4, **“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”** If there is a reason I do not love Ramon, it is because I have completely taken for granted the way God loves me. These two things are absolutely connected.

Sometimes I think about the people I love in my life. Do I love my wife? Absolutely. Do I love people of other races? I think I do. Do I love people with different political and worldviews than me? I certainly try.

Do I love Ramon?

I have never been able to answer this question the way I know God wants me to. And no matter how often I preach it, it never gets easier.

It will not get easier until I completely grasp Romans 15:7. Everything about being humble and bearing with each other and being of one mind and voice hinges on knowing how much I am loved and accepted. It truly is the source of everything I do.

The New Testament says to forgive others because Christ forgave you. It says to lay down your life for others because Christ laid down his life for you. It says to accept the Ramons because Jesus accepted you, at your most annoying, your most sinful.

So I ask my REO readers today to think about the Ramons in your life. Do you love them? Or, like me, do you often avoid them? I encourage all of us today to let the truth of Romans 15 and Ephesians 4 help us answer that question.

Because, unlike on Seinfeld, it is not funny at all to treat Ramon the way Jerry did.

Holding Hands

Holding Hands

See them meet.

The childlike wonder on their faces. The rapture. The anticipation. The thrill of touch. The exploration of joints and gaps. The overwhelming rightness of it all. Fuzzyheaded with the joy of the moment.

See them live.

Interruptions and pressure. The mundanity of living drapes their shoulders and they have no time. To last, they fight and claw and push through the fog. To the last, carving out a safe haven; a home for their souls. It is delicate and easily broken, yet made to endure, if cherished and chosen. They grip harder, for the sake of a vow.

See them fade.

Worn. Bent. Glassy-eyed and frail. Forgotten by most, remembered by the other. Days filled with emptiness. Nights vacant of wholeness. Time has waged its war and it will surely prevail. Yet a gentle touch is the defiant howl in the face of all that seeks love's demise.

See them love.