

# Grace Notes



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"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. *1 John 4:10-11*





## From the Pastor's Desk

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples,*

I don't know how many of you saw the movie, *Castaway*, starring Tom Hanks. Hank's character was aboard a FedEx plane that crashed into the south Pacific. He was the only survivor, who miraculously washed up on the beach of a small uninhabited island where he was marooned for several years. Eventually, after much effort, he lashed together enough scraps of wood to make a raft and against all odds of surviving, set sail in the vast Pacific, only to be rescued by a freighter. The movie revolves around his feelings of utter isolation and his desperation for human contact, yet at the end of the movie we find him standing alone at a crossroads in the wide open prairie appearing to look as if he had, after all this time, gotten used to the solitude.

There are those, of course, who we would consider hermits, but by and large most people are social creatures. We need contact with others. This is why we have villages, and towns, and cities.

Yet there is an interesting phenomenon that in larger and more populous environments there is an almost self-imposed isolation. For example, in a small country store, people are often more apt to engage one another in conversation, but in a larger city, it is much less likely to happen. Try making eye contact with people, for example, while walking down a crowded street in New York City. I noticed this especially while riding on the crowded subway in Beijing. It is impossible not to have physical contact with others, but everyone makes their own private space, most often with smart phone in hand. The need for interpersonal contact notwithstanding, people are suspicious of one another unless they have a relationship with one another.

One of our Elders called attention to the fact that in Paul's prayers for the various churches to whom he addressed his epistles, he prays specifically that we might "know God" better. He also prays that we might love one another more, and exhorts us accordingly. A pattern that I am beginning to see here is that there is actually a strong correlation between the two.

When Moses delivered God's code of ethics to ancient Israelites from the side of the mountain they specifically addressed our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. So when Jesus was asked by the religious leaders of his day what the greatest commandment was, he summarized the Commandments by saying, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.*", and "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The problem is, both of these areas of life were impacted dramatically by the fall. We fail miserably at both.

This is graphically portrayed in the earliest chapters of the Bible. It is plain to see in the lives of Adam and Eve. Prior to their eating of the prohibited fruit they had perfect harmony with God and a very harmonious relationship with each other, but after their eating of the fruit, they hid from God and sought to conceal themselves from his sight. They also showed the first conflict in their relationship by shifting the blame of sin to each other. Then in the next chapter, we see that their first son came to a crisis in his relationship with his brother because of jealousy, covetousness, and envy, and took his resentment to an extreme by killing his brother. We gasp at the callousness, but it is all too common in our world, and even manifests itself in more subtle ways in our own lives.

What is amazing is, when we think of the curse which God placed on Cain to be a "fugitive and a wanderer", Cain cried out in distress. The prospect of isolation was unbearable. And yet, in the true sense, it was the curse he had brought upon himself. And it is the curse we bring upon ourselves.

Enter Jesus. Jesus came to his own and his own rejected him. Yet it was in that rejection that he would restore us to the God who knows us and desires to be known by us, and also to restore us to one another.

Enter the church. The church is such a strange mixture of people who long to be known by others and yet, like Cain, resist the demands of knowing and loving others. Here again, we see the need for God's grace. And that really is the key, isn't it?

Pastor Tom Bridgman



# Missions Corner



## Book Review: Get Real!

by Kirsten Wanamaker

If you've ever felt that you're not as open about sharing your faith as you should be I recommend *Get Real Sharing, Your Everyday Faith Every Day*, by John S. Leonard. John S. Leonard, PhD is a professor at Westminster Seminary and the founding pastor of Creshiem Valley Church. I've felt that I haven't been as open as I should be about sharing my faith. Dr. Leonard addresses all the reasons for not sharing openly with others that I've struggled with in his book.

In one part of his book John Leonard describes being hesitant to share the gospel even when you're excited to, because you feel that you "don't have all the answers". According to him, many of us live under the guilt of not being "Christian enough". I've felt this way. He writes that you don't have to have all the answers. He also wrote that we as Christians should look for people to "listen to" not talk at. Being a good listener is valuable. This was very encouraging to me. I know how important it is for people to feel that they've been heard.

He also mentions that "one of the most important holidays to participate in, for Christ's sake, is Halloween". You'll meet your neighbors. He recommends that you be "normal folk and a great addition to the neighborhood". We need these opportunities to "allow our Christian faith to leak out". If we remain strangers in our own neighborhoods how can we ever share the gospel with those around us?

Dr. Leonard advises that when sharing with neighbors we should relax and be ourselves. "Our job is not to pressure, but to explain and clarify. It is God who changes the heart." This removes the feeling of failure if the party you're sharing with isn't open to hearing the gospel. It's not our works that gain us anything it's purely by grace alone, so relax and enjoy your conversations with others.

He suggests that we pray for others when we're with them. Ask them what they'd like you to pray about on their behalf. When people ask for your advice, tell them that you will pray for them. He suggests praying with your eyes open because people will get uncomfortable in public when you're praying for them with your eyes closed. He writes "it is powerful to look someone in the eye while you're praying for him. It is as if you're looking into his soul". Praying with my eyes open never occurred to me. This is a very valid observation. You want people to feel comfortable around you.

The last paragraph of the book is: "The gospel is too good to be true. And once you believe that--truly believe that--nothing will stop you from wanting to share it". John Leonard's book inspires Christians to share their faith with others as an everyday part of life.

Understanding that no one has all the answers or is perfectly equipped to share their faith, but that it should be a relaxed, comfortable part of our everyday lives takes the pressure off. This book encourages sharing in many useful, positive ways. It's a valuable resource for evangelism.

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Leonard, John S., *Get Real Sharing Your Everyday Faith Every Day* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2013)

# Selling Superiority

*by Ian Bridgman*

I was in a hurry, looking for the nearest entrance into the maze of barricades, stages, vendor booths, and other random attractions that had transformed almost all of downtown Las Vegas into a raging music festival for 3 nights. I had been flown out west to join one of the set up teams, and one bonus of the job was a free entry pass for the entire weekend. With the preparations complete, my only responsibilities were to find the rest of my crew and enjoy the festivities. Although we weren't really working during the festival, the organizers had still given us "Workin' It" wristbands instead of the spectator bands issued to most everybody else. These bands allowed us to enter the zone through what normally were exits or through any other gap in the security fence. I found one of these gaps and was quickly ushered through by security. Once inside, I turned and watched a couple behind me that hoped to enter the same way. That same security team, however, blocked their path, and after explaining the difference in the wristbands, pointed them towards the main entrance, a good half-mile further away. The couple protested briefly, and then reluctantly began their long walk to their assigned entrance.

As I watched the two of them walk away, a feeling came up inside me; a feeling that briefly felt good, but one that I knew was ugly and selfish. I knew that the couple was going to be stopped, and I liked it. For them to be able to follow me in would not have hindered my progress in any way, and yet there was a kind of smug satisfaction at being able to do something they couldn't—a feeling of superiority or higher status. It wasn't because of anything I had done, the worker passes were given to us only out of convenience, but that didn't matter. I had a privilege that they did not. Mine was pink, theirs was purple. Mine let me breeze past security, theirs meant a long walk and a time consuming security check.

It occurred to me that many people who come to Las Vegas are willing to pay a lot of money for that same feeling. My main role there was actually to help set up the VIP section for the casino big shots. Once the work was done, I wouldn't be allowed in that area until it was time to tear it down. Those patrons were bestowed an even higher status than my own. Further down the strip, lavish nightclubs promote exclusive VIP packages, complete with massive liquor bottles that spray fireworks served by an entourage of attractive women, so that everyone present can notice and admire the patrons on the receiving end. The highest echelon in the city, of course, goes to the legendary "high rollers", men and women who can throw phenomenal sums of money at games of chance. The whole concept of VIP at the festivals, nightclubs, and casinos is not just to provide a good time and spectacular services, but to provide things to some that are denied to others. Establishments in Las Vegas aren't just about serving up drinks and music and good times. They are selling shots of superiority.

Humans have coveted after higher status since the beginning of time, or at least since Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve bought into Satan's lie that they could "be like God". The human race has been paying the price ever since. In many Asian cultures, "saving face" has long been valued more than life itself, and India codified its social standings through the caste system. Here in the America, young women will give their bodies in return for recognition; young men will gun each other down for it. Those with the means simply pay cash. By stratifying its pleasure seeking guests, Las Vegas and other places like it are betting on human nature and making a killing.

*(continued on next page)*

*(Selling Superiority cont'd)*

James and John, the sons of Zebedee in Mathew 20, along with their mother, wanted a piece of that superiority as well. They weren't interested in being equal to the other disciples in the new kingdom (Mathew 19.28). They wanted a higher status all for themselves, and a seat at Jesus's side. Jesus's response is completely contrary to human instinct, when he tells them that "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." (Mathew 20:26-27) Those of us who grew up in the church have probably heard this so many times that we don't even think about what it really means. "Yea, of course, the first will be last, that's what we Christians say." But do we really know what that looks like?

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet in John 13, it wasn't heroically savior-like, edgy, avant-garde, or counter-culturally cool. It was scandalous. Gauche. Unacceptable. Humiliating. Peter was embarrassed that his respectable rabbi was acting like a servant, and tried to tell Jesus to stop. Washing feet, though, was a small thing compared to what Jesus had already done, and what he was about to do. He traded in his heavenly throne for a feeding trough in a smelly cave, and would die on a cross, the most disgraceful death the Roman Empire could devise. He went from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows, to save a mob of untouchables like us. He gave up his heavenly status, so that we could be given a new status—as children of the King.

If we're honest, losing face as an adult carries far more consequences than losing it as a child. Perhaps this is why parents will often tell their young children not to worry what others think, only to turn and spend their own lives desperately trying to preserve or improve their position in society. Truly following Christ's example may cost us friends, family, or relationships, or it may require us to be a friend or family to someone we want nothing to do with—someone who doesn't meet our expectations or someone who might tarnish our image. As our culture continues to break from any biblical attachments, being a Christian may soon cost us social status and favorable recognition. Our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world know this cost well, and we will have much to learn from them.

In the end, I did have the chance to check out those big name nightclubs on the strip. The L.A. Dodgers were there that night, as well as members of the Sacramento Kings. I went without the \$2,000 VIP status and so was just another head of poofy hair mashed into the crowd. I still met some really cool people, though, and had a great time. The music festival, my first of this size, was quite the experience as well, but I'm not sure I would shell out my own money for it. One friend recently told me that my life "seemed so fabulous", and for this particular season, I truly do feel blessed in many ways, both big and small. I do not know what God has in store for me, but I do know that being a disciple of Jesus will someday, somehow, cost me something. I hope that when that time comes, that I will be obedient to his calling, take up my cross, and follow Him.



# GRACE CHURCH NEWS



## Men's Prayer Fellowship

Men of all ages are welcome at the Men's Prayer Fellowship. This month the men will meet **Saturday, February 21st, from 7:00-8:30 a.m.**, at the home of Doug Rose in Stockbridge.

Come for a time of looking at the Scriptures, discussion, prayer, and fellowship.



## Prayer Gathering

All are encouraged to take part in our monthly Prayer Gathering on **Sunday, February 22nd, from 5:00-6:00 p.m.** Join us as we come before our Father's throne to praise Him, pray for one another, seek His direction, and "find grace and mercy to help us in our time of need." *Hebrews 4:16*

## Winter Cheer

During these snowy days of winter, let's take time to reach out to each other. Send a note, invite for tea or a meal, make a phone call, bake some bread or cookies, write a thank you note, or do whatever suits your style and the need. It's amazing how cheering a simple act can be.

*Love one another with brotherly affection. Romans 12:10*

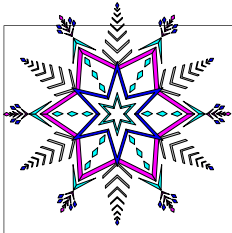


## LOOKING AHEAD

### Spring Women's Retreats

- ◆ The annual Faithlift, will be held on **Saturday, March 14th, from 9:00 am-3:30 pm.** The theme is "Our Heart Is Restless Until It Rests In God." Faithlift is sponsored by the Evangelical Free Church of Pittsfield but uses the facilities of Hope Church in Lenox. Cost:\$30. For more information go to: [www.pittsfieldefc.org/faithlift.htm](http://www.pittsfieldefc.org/faithlift.htm)
- ◆ Reserve **April 17-18, 2015** for the annual OPC Women's Retreat at Lakeside Conference Center in Pittsfield. The keynote speaker will be Kathleen Curto. The topic is "**Keeping the Heart,**" based on the Puritan John Flavel's study of Proverbs 4:23: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."

Many women find these retreats edifying and a blessed time of fellowship with fellow sisters in Christ. Consider attending one or both as you are able!



# February 2015

**SUN**

**MON**

**TUES**

**WED**

**THURS**

**FRI**

**SAT**

<b>1</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	<b>2</b> 7:00 Addictions Victorious	<b>3</b> <b>7:00 Annual Meeting</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>8</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	<b>9</b> 7:00 Addictions Victorious	<b>10</b> 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b> Valentine's Day 
<b>15</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	<b>16</b> 7:00 Addictions Victorious	<b>17</b> 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b> 7:00 am Men's Prayer Fellowship
<b>22</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship <b>5:00 Prayer Gathering</b>	<b>23</b> 7:00 Addictions Victorious	<b>24</b> 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>