

Training Wheels

A Short Collection of Devotionals



Kelly Crull

I Don't Believe in the 8th Commandment

What would you say if I told you I don't believe in the Eighth Commandment? You know, You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15). I must not have been brainwashed enough in third-grade Sunday school when we glued strips of paper with the commandments on them to cardboard stone tablets. The more I think about the 8th commandment, the more I think Christians should steal. They should use their God-given talents to be the best robbers around. Think about Jesus on the cross. Who was his right-hand man? A robber.

This past week I was typing an English paper in the basement of the library. I was absolutely ripping it up, probably typing around 93 words per minute, when a friend of mine, blonde with glasses, stopped me between keystrokes. He said, "I've decided to take a study break," and in my mind I added my own afterthought, "You're my conversational victim for the next twenty minutes regardless of how many times you look at your watch." I hummed and hawed my way through the first ten minutes and realized we were in this for the long haul. Actually, our usual twenty-minute gab session lasted thirty-seven minutes--last time I checked.

You know what, though? I oughta give my friend a Good Christian Award for stealing my time. He stood there in the middle of the ASK center like a street-corner evangelist on a soapbox and preached God's faithfulness. He told me he's an Ag major, like he has a dozen times, and that there's no family farm for him to take over when he graduates in May. He said he doesn't know what he's going to do. Then he went on to tell me more about God's faithfulness and that all you can do is give God your best, and He'll take care of you.

My friend is not the only one who steals. Plenty of biblical characters--God-fearing ones--are into stealing. Take Joseph, for example, who abuses his power as governor of the land to keep his brothers from returning home. Sure he's a thief. He goes incognito, not telling them he's their brother, and orders his housekeeper to plant a silver cup in the brothers' sack of grain. They're almost sent to jail for lugging that cup half way home, and all because Joseph wants to steal a few days of their time.

In the end, Joseph is just like my friend. He's stealing time for the Lord. He's stealing time because he loves his brothers and has an important story to share. He breaks down before his brothers and tells them, "I am your brother Joseph" (Genesis 45:4). He holds his brothers captive long enough to forgive them for selling him as a slave when he was younger and to give them hope. He says, "But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (45:7). I guess sometimes stealing is the best way to love your neighbor.

Just when my friend was about to leave, you'll never guess what he did. He said, "Do you want to come over some night this week and look at pictures from my summer missions project?" Right there in broad daylight with plenty of eyewitnesses he asked if he could steal more of my time--and it was wonderful.

Connect the Dots

When I was a kid, at the grocery store I used to beg my mom for puzzle books. I would sit in the cart with my feet dangling, and she would unstrap her purse and pull out one of these flimsy cardboard books filled with spelling games, word finds, cross-word puzzles, and connect the dots. I liked the connect the dots best because I never knew what I was drawing at first. After connecting a few dots with a pencil, I would hold the book out and look at the picture, trying to guess if it was a duck or a castle or a fireman. Sometimes I would know right away, but other times I would have to wait until all the dots were connected to find out what I was drawing.

I think the Apostle Paul sometimes uses a connect-the-dots approach in his letters to the church. When he's writing about something so profound and so mysterious that it's borderline incomprehensible, he does what anyone would do, he tells us what he knows. He doesn't even attempt to tell us everything. He just gives us some of the details, some of the dots, so to speak, and hopes that we will see the whole picture.

Paul's familiar passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is a fine example of connecting the dots. Each of Paul's statements is another black point on the page. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy. Love does not boast. Etc. Etc. God's asking Paul to describe one of the greatest mysteries of human life in human terms, and Paul can't give us the whole picture, so he gives us a page full of dots.

As a kid my goal in a connect the dots was not drawing the lines perfectly between dots. My goal was to see the whole picture. But in order to see the picture, I had to connect the dots. In 1 Corinthians 13, God is challenging us to look beyond Paul's statements as some sort of love thermometer. Reading the passage that way, we would only be capable of realizing that we don't measure up, that we're all at absolute zero. God does want us to know that we're cold without Him, but even more importantly, He wants us to see the bigger picture. He wants us to see the glimpse of true love that He has created with Paul's words. He wants us to know that love is something so profoundly wonderful that all we can do is hope for training wheels.

I'm thankful the best Paul can do is give us dots because that means God's gift of love is beyond Paul. It's beyond all human comprehension. And in spite of our limitations, God loves us, and we love each other. Even without understanding completely, we can still give and receive love.

Cutting Green Peppers

I met a wise man once. He taught me how to cut up a green pepper during an AA meeting. I was in New Jersey staying at a Lutheran church with a group of students from my college, and I was helping out at the Christian school. It was my night to cook supper, which I assured the others in my group would make for a memorable evening, and I was in the kitchen with a kettle of water boiling on the stove. I had this green pepper on the counter and realized I didn't know how to cut it up. I insulted myself several times for not having watched more *Iron Chef* episodes and studied the rubbery green vegetable closely, hoping somehow its secret would be revealed to me.

I was standing there with the knife when this man walked in and asked if I was looking for the AA meeting next door. I told him no, I was just trying to make spaghetti. He walked to the sink and washed his hands, watching me curiously, probably wondering why someone would just stand over a green pepper and do nothing. Once his hands were dried off, he looked at me again and pointed at the vegetable on the counter. "Do you want me to show you how to cut up that green pepper?" he asked. All I could do was smile shyly.

He joined me at the counter and circled his finger around the top of the pepper. "Cut around the stem and pull out the core," he said. "Now slice the pepper in half, shake out the seeds, and cut the halves into strips." He watched patiently as I carried out the procedure. "That's it. Congratulations," he said, smiling.

Believe it or not, the Bible doesn't say anything about cutting up green peppers. I even checked my concordance. Actually, just between you and me, I don't think Jesus was even much of a cook. As far as I can tell, he usually just showed up for food. But regardless of Jesus' culinary skills, the point is the Bible doesn't tell us everything. There's no words about playing badminton or sketching a beach or identifying a glow worm. The Bible can't even tell us the square root of nine. And you know what? I think God is perfectly fine with what the Bible doesn't say. I think He says the Bible is sufficient in its gospel message. The rest of what we need to know, I think He says, is in the world around us.

God gives us people. He gives us people who know how to think, to believe, to imagine, and to love. His words are stamped like tattoos on every one of us. Stamped in ink at the bottom of business memos and written in marker on classroom white boards, God words are given to us by people, who know how His world works.

I found it fitting, as I scooped the pieces of pepper into a pile and dumped them into my spaghetti sauce, to stop for a moment and thank God for people, for the man in khakis from the AA meeting.

The Three-second Prayer

My 11-year-old brother-in-law, Rick, prayed on Sunday before lunch. He set the dinner roll he was buttering on his plate, folded his hands neatly, bowed his head in reverence, and proceeded to fire off about three seconds of undecipherable language at a speed I've only heard from a tape deck in fast forward. His prayer sounded more like ancient Hebrew than English, although I'll admit I did hear the words "God" and "food" in there somewhere. Thankfully I caught most of his prayer when his sister, Heidi, piped up from across the table and in perfect monk-like monotone uttered the words, "God is great. God is good. Lord, I thank You for this food. By His hands we all are fed. Thank you, Lord, for daily bread. Amen."

I don't doubt for a minute that thousands of other kids across the country like Rick are rattling off prayers as fast as they can like they're trying to win a contest. I remember rambling through my own prayers as a kid. And for some reason, my parents let me do it. There must be some bit of wisdom from the parent handbook that explains why moms and dads allow their kids to keep butchering prayers.

This morning I was reading Paul's letter to Titus, and I ran across something that might just justify prayer butchering. The passage I read mentioned that curious word *discipline*. Paul writes in chapter 1:8 that a Christian must be "hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined." I don't think Paul is talking about spanking here. He's talking about discipline in the way the Benedictine monks did in Italy during the first century after Christ. Their lives reflected the word *discipline* as it meant an inner strength from God that enabled them to control their desires and actions. These godly men found the best way to be disciplined was to have good habits. They ordered their lives so activities like meditation, psalm reading, singing, and prayer were scheduled into every day.

Good habits, like saying a prayer before every meal, are worthwhile. Of course we're going to have our days, months, even years at the worst when we continue in our habits without thinking or appreciating their value. But that's exactly the reason for habits. It's why St. Benedict wrote an entire book about how his monks were to live from day to day. Forming good habits is a way of keeping ourselves in check. When our habits become empty and thoughtless, we wonder why we even take the time to do them. That's when, hopefully, we come to the realization that we're in need of renewal.

I imagine Rick put about as much thought into his prayer on Sunday as I did this morning when I brushed my teeth before school, and I wish it wasn't that way. But, nonetheless, I'm thankful his parents make him pray. Today they raise their voices and rattle the silverware just to make him pray because they hope that years down the road when he's on his own, he'll have good habits to keep him in check. That's the secret: good habits are good discipline.