



My son, we need to talk

I was praying with my son recently. After I petitioned the Lord to make him into a man who loved Jesus and his church, my son was disturbed. It took a while for him to spit it out, but it turns out he didn't want to grow up to be a man. He wanted to stay a boy. I've noticed that this is an attitude that is shared among many of the young men in our churches. Instead of moving towards spiritual manhood, they are stuck in spiritual infancy. I know that some of our young men are not disturbed by this. But that is not the case for you. You want to grow up. You want to move into spiritual manhood. You don't want to be an infant tossed back and forth by the waves, but you want to grow up into him who is the Head, Christ. I hope you will allow some of my questions to help you in that quest for growth.

My Son, what is your delight?

I've noticed that there are a lot of things that delight you. The All Blacks, your four wheel drive, the new Bunnings catalogue, and pretty much any meal with meat in it. But there is something that hasn't captured your delight like it should. Something which the Psalmist says: *'is sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb'*. It is the Word of God. There is simply no way you can grow into Christian maturity if you are not immersing yourself in the Word of God. I realise you go to church twice on Sunday and you get a good dose of Scripture then. But you can't survive on that. That is like gorging yourself on a meal once a week and not eating the rest of the time. I know you certainly don't do that.

I realise that reading the Bible is not an easy thing for you. However, being a follower of Christ means that you are called to love him with all your mind. This means you will have to discipline yourself to concentrate long enough to get through more than the verse from the *Today* booklet. This means you will have to learn to follow a Pauline argument. I know you can follow arguments quite easily when they involve other matters, so I'm confident that you'll eventually be able to navigate your way through a book like Romans if you work at it. I'd encourage you to work through a Bible reading programme instead of Bible dipping. If you just can't get into the habit of reading (after working hard at it for at least a month), there are some good audio Bibles out there you might want to try.

There really is a world of delight once you become more disciplined at Bible reading. You'll come to see connections between books of the Bible that you've never seen before. Passages that you are familiar with will speak to you in fresh ways as you grow into maturity. You'll be surprised to find how God providentially orders that a Bible passage you've read in the morning is directly applicable to a situation you face later that day. What's more, you'll be building a firm spiritual foundation for when the tough times come. It's very hard to develop a theology of suffering when you're in the middle of it. You'll discover that the Word of God really is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path in the darkest of times.

My son, what are you playing at?

Son, I've noticed that you tend to play a lot. I know you've got a job, and you've got your studies, but your 'play dates' do seem to take up a lot of your schedule. Is it possible that your 'playtime' is stunting your spiritual growth? The video games into the early hours of the morning, the DVD collection, the weekends away motor-biking or tramping, the fitness regime Monday through Saturday (and just a light workout on Sunday of course). Isn't that an excessive play regime?

Please don't think I'm opposed to such activities. These are all legitimate pursuits to play at. I have no interest in binding your conscience with a list of what is good and what is bad, or rules about the appropriate amount of time that you should be spending on these pursuits.

But you have to ask yourself the question, 'are these things really helping to further your spiritual growth?' Are these things enabling you to draw nearer to Christ? Are these things helping you to grow in holiness? Or have they become distractions which are keeping you in spiritual diapers when by now you should have been able to put childish ways behind you. The writer to the Hebrews says '*let us throw off **everything** that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us*' (Heb 12:2). Perhaps it is time for the play station to go? Perhaps it is time to say goodbye to one of your many cars? Perhaps it is time to use play for what it's meant to be used for. To refresh and revitalise you for Christian service.

My son, what are you putting into the church life?

Maybe you think I've got this question the wrong way around. Maybe you think it should read 'what are you getting out of church life'. What ministries are there devoted to meeting your needs? What social opportunities is the church devoting to your age demographic? How is the preacher making his sermons relevant to you as a Millennial (as if a preacher has to make the gospel 'relevant')? But these are not the questions that I hope you are asking. You are not a consumer of religious services that the church needs to dispense to keep the customer satisfied. As a Christian, you are part of the body of Christ. Believe it or not, you have a vital part in the functioning of that body. You need to be functioning in the body in order to grow and develop. As the old saying goes 'use it or lose it'.

So I commend to you the virtue of committing to a local church. Don't shop around for the church or service that suits you best at your particular 'stage' in life. That will only help you develop that all too common male malady of commitment phobia. Commit to the body of believers where you are – get to know them – invite them around to your flat (even if it is just some nibbles after church) – get outside your age demographic. My greatest times of growth in the church have been when older and wiser Christians have walked alongside me. What a wealth of experience and maturity we have to tap into in our congregations. More than anything, I commend you to serve in the church. I do believe that the Lord has given you many gifts. Some of them may be well hidden, but they are there. Try some avenue of service in church life. If you can't find a job to do in the church you are not looking very hard. Once you start serving you will be surprised how it stretches you, and how it also gives you the sense of belonging that you seem to lack at the present time.

My son, what are you doing about sexual purity?

Paul's command to the Ephesians churches was that among them there mustn't even be a hint of sexual immorality. Not even a pinch. I understand that this is terribly difficult in the environment in which we live today. There's the pornography that just appears on your Facebook stream. There are the revealing pictures that pop up even on the most innocent of internet sites. It's hard to even watch TV these days without being confronted with some spicy scenes that aren't going to help you maintain your sexual purity. Be assured, that there is nothing like pornography to stunt your Christian growth. In fact, pornography has a great capacity not just to stunt growth, but to destroy spiritual life altogether. So the thing I wanted to talk to you about, was whether you had a plan. A plan to deal with this problem.

Perhaps it's a little late for a plan for you. Perhaps you are already living in bondage to pornography. Perhaps you know the cycle of guilt and remorse, of losing the fight against temptation (again), of enjoying the fleeting pleasure of sin, and then the resultant guilt and self-loathing that follow. I can sometimes see that there is no joy in your life with Christ, you have a glazed look in your eye during worship, and you just don't seem to be able to move forward in the Christian life. Those are often signs that accompany an addiction to pornography. I don't tell you this to make you feel miserable, but to explain to you that this is a normal way to feel once this soul-sapping sin has you in its grip. The wonderful thing is that we have a Saviour who can break

the power of cancelled sin. You are going to need help as you look to him to lift you out of this dark valley. Why don't you give me a call (or one of your elders), and we can begin to bring this sin out into the light. It never thrives well once you start to deal with it.

Now, back to the plan. It would be useful for you to have some accountability software on your computer and other electronic devices. Something like covenant eyes is helpful. Please don't be so foolish as to think you can have your phone or computer in your room. That's like going to a nudist beach and promising to keep your eyes closed the whole time – I simply don't think you are able to do it. When you are on-line, set yourself up in a public space. You may also need to give up your smart phone for a season (or permanently) if you are already struggling. Yes I'm serious. People were able to survive in the world prior to the advent of constant internet access. I realise it might be painful, but I think this is the kind of situation Jesus had in mind when he said *'if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.'*

Most of all, you need to start cultivating your relationship with Christ. You won't maintain sexual purity by simply avoiding temptation and having good accountability structures with others. You need to displace one pleasure with a truly great pleasure. You need to be what one good book title suggested: 'captivated by a better vision.' You need to come to appreciate that there are more pleasures in Christ than there could ever be in a few pixels in a screen. And that leads me to my final question...

My son, what are you doing with Christ?

I know you've got a lot of theology under your belt. You can crack out the five points of Calvinism, you can blast your way through the Canons of Dort, and you were up there with the best of them at school on the Bible knowledge quizzes. But how well do you know Christ? If Paul confessed 'I want to know Christ', then surely we ought to be pressing on to know him better. I'm not simply talking here about filling your head with more facts about Jesus. I'm talking about developing your relationship with Him by growing in your appreciation and wonder at his person and work. By delighting yourself in his incarnation and self-humbling. By adoring his mercy and compassion. By sitting under his teaching and submitting to his Lordship. By being humbled as you consider what he did on the cross for you. There is nothing in this earth as magnificent as knowing Christ. Make him your magnificent obsession,¹ and you will inevitably grow into his likeness and image.

Kenny Sailors was a famous American basketball player. He is *credited* with inventing "the jump shot as an alternative to the two-handed, flat-footed set shot." He won an NCAA championship, and he played in the NBA. He was married for sixty years to his beloved wife. He was being interviewed and he was asked, with all his accolades and achievements, what the most satisfying thing in life had been for him. And he replied:

'I'm an old man, 90yo, I've experienced much. One thing that has stood the test of time is God. He has satisfied me in a way that all the fame and success could never do. Nothing does compare with my experience I have with Christ and the life in him. There is nothing in this world that can even come close to it.'

I pray that this will be your experience as well.

Andrew de Vries

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¹ *Magnificent Obsession* is the title of a book by David Robertson. It is a great book and well worth a read.