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Title: The Fluid of the Gospel of Love

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Introduction:

In his book *The Sports Gene*, author David Epstein, uncovers a counterintuitive truth about cultural beliefs around today's athletes. I watched the author give a Ted talk a few years back where he compares 100 yard world record holder in 1936 Jesse Owen with the current record holder Usain Bolt. He said if Bolt and Owens could have raced in today's Olympic games, Owens would have lost to Bolt by a full twelve steps, which is huge if the runners are only racing 100 yards.

Epstein goes on to say we assume from that, and from other examples where world records are constantly being broken, that today's athletes are bigger, stronger faster. It's the most logical conclusion. But just because it's the most logical conclusion does not make it the most accurate conclusion.

Epstein goes on to say that our genetic make up is not necessarily changing. What's happening is that we're getting smarter. In other words, it's a collaborative effort.

He goes on to show Owen running on the same synthetic track, with the same starting blocks, and shows that provided with the same conditions, and the same ingenuity, Owens only loses to Bolt by two steps. The conclusion: we're not changing, we're changing the playing field so that athletes have a better chance to succeed. In a similar way we can make assumptions at times about our faith.

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The main point: In order for our faith to grow and mature we have to be willing to challenge some of the comfortable areas of our faith. Over time we develop perspectives, and those perspectives affect the way we view and interact with those around us. It's essential for us to continually draw near to the core of our faith.

Point 1: Understanding Thomas

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Passages: John 20:24-29

Generally Thomas is known as doubting Thomas because we he needs to see the resurrected Christ with his own eyes. He feels the holes in Christ's hands and realizes it's him and then declares, "My Lord and God." Christ then declares blessed are those who believe without seeing.

But there's more to Thomas' story. In my mind there's a reason why he doubts and it's because he's such a loyal follower. His loyalty (See John 11:11-16) could very well be the reason for his doubt.

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John 11:11-16 Then Thomas said, "Let us go with him so that we may die with him."

People who are extremely loyal have trouble understanding betrayal and there's a good chance that Thomas felt betrayed after Christ "left them". He loved his leader, and when his leader is killed, I wonder if Thomas felt hurt and betrayed. Because of his personality, he would have never would never have left Christ.

The full picture of Thomas might be a little more accurate. He's fiercely loyal Thomas, willing to die with Christ—and now Christ was dead and their dream was dead and he felt betrayed. So when the disciples told him he was alive and they'd seen him, he decides he's not going to be hurt again. Because he loves his Rabbi so much, his Messiah so much, that he can't bare to feel love for him again if the disciples were in error.

Thomas' story reveals a few things about our faith. One, we can believe something for a long time, and still discover something new about it. And two, the more we empathize with a person's situation, the more we develop an understanding of where they're at.

Second Point—With this in mind, let's discuss the Fluid Gospel of Love

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At the center is what's most important that which we can't do without, that which makes our faith our faith. Christ's deity, God's love for humanity, Christ's redemptive blood, humanity's need for forgiveness, God's grace, His love...the center is the crux of the Christian walk—the essence of the faith journey. This is not an exhaustive list nor is in any order of importance. It's simply where a Christ follower starts their day and lives their faith throughout the day from day to day.

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Other circles exist as well. There's the circle of "Increased understanding of Faith". This circle represents much and supports the essential circle. In it one could place that which makes a denomination unique, ideas surrounding ones millennial views, and theories surrounding creation for example. The much-debated church music would fall into this circle as well. There are central ideas within this bubble and there are even fringe ideas that end up this circle.

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(See next slide for a discussion about the lack of balance between circles. When this circle becomes our focus, this can become problematic. When our faith becomes

merely a cerebral exercise, that becomes problematic. But there are signposts that indicate this has happened or is happening. Common indications:

Hypercritical of other believers
Judgmental of non-believers
Can't relate to non-believers
Cerebral appreciation of God
Language becomes more negative
Secondary issues take center stage
Faith begins to create isolation

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On the other side of the essence circle, is the often-neglected circle that I'm going to call "Faith and Culture". In today's culture it's essential for Christians to begin to recognize this circle. This circle is what I'd consider living out our faith. It's the circle that takes our faith from theoretical and idealistic to practical. It's the marriage version of our faith. In a way the theoretical version of our faith is the "I'd never do that when I'm married" and then you get married and you find yourself doing just that because you're actually living out marriage and not merely talking about it. This is the most complicated part of our faith. It's what God created grace and forgiveness for. It's the trenches part of our faith. It's the front lines of our faith. It's the moving from spectator to going into the game part of our faith. It's the part of our faith that cause us to grow the most.

Point Three—The three circles in Scripture (John 8)

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In this passage, the crowd pushes Jesus to play on their playing field. They bring a woman to him because they want to trap Jesus and so the woman is treated like a pawn. To them they know the Law and what it says but they also feel that Jesus' teaching of love and grace and forgiveness contradict the Law.

If we're honest each of us can identify with three different views in the story.

There's the lost soul of the woman brought to Jesus. There's the crowd who feels justified in carrying out their action of carrying out the law upon the woman because of her actions. Then there's the redeemed woman.

I think one of my favorite parts of this passage is the way Jesus doesn't join in the panic of the situation. He takes the time to reach down and write in the sand.

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He does this because he knows there's a major shift that needs to take place—a shift in perspective. He needs to move the crowd from hostile and judgmental. He needs the crowd to understand that they're correct in their belief that the punishment of sin is death but that one day soon his sacrifice will take care of this sin. He knows

they're anger is directed at him, and the woman is the scapegoat to trap him. So he doesn't engage their urgency or their panic. When they continue to push him he stands up and provides them with an answer—not the one they expect. He gives them permission but he places one condition on her death. The only ones who can cast stones are the ones who are sinless themselves.

And in this statement he shifts perspectives. He reorders their understanding of what's most important. The balance of power shifts from what we know to be true to a truth that exists that's far greater than what they know to be true.

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Then he stoops down and writes in the sand again. When they all leave and it's just he and the woman left he forgives her and redeems her. He states that he does not condemn her and then he asks her to go and leave her life of sin. Here's your new life, now go and be responsible with it.

Some of you can imagine that moment because it was last week for you. And for some of you it was last year. Others it was 20 years ago and it feels like it was yesterday. For those who've been Christ followers their entire lives, it may take a little more to remember your moment of redemption, but for each one of us who's accepted Christ's redeeming blood, we all have that in common.

Point 4—Closer than We Know

The narrative of the prairie boy

One of my good friends, I'll call him Greg, told me a story about why it is he has absolutely no use for the Christian faith. He grew up in a small prairie town where most people are farmers, and most farmers know each other. On one particular Sunday morning, he was out for a walk and in the distance he noticed someone sprawled out in a large mud puddle in a parking lot beside the main road through town. As he got closer, he recognized the person on the ground as the town drunk—he had obviously passed out and fallen into the dirty water. To make matters worse, the time it took for Greg to arrive to aid the fallen man, a number of cars passed by the drunk and simply kept on driving. The drivers were in a hurry, and the three or four that went by all turned into the same parking lot—the one with the building with the large steeple and the cross. They drove by a man in need of help to go to a place where they could learn about reaching out to those in need. I'm sure lots of good reasons exist for why those in their Sunday bests did not have time to stop, and I wonder if any of those reasons ran through the priest's and the Levite's head in Luke 10: I have to help out in Sunday school today, I have to set up communion, or I'm in charge of the sound for the service. Maybe the thoughts were more judgmental in nature: when will he ever learn his lesson, that will teach him for drinking too much, or he's always been a loser.

Greg stooped down and pulled the drunk from the puddle, took him to a store and bought him some dry clothes and then took him for coffee. When Greg told me

this story, distain dripped from his lips. He spoke with much hurt in his voice and connects this story to why he has zero time for faith, and even less time for Christians. He can't seem to reconcile the fact that none of these Christians stopped to help. When he told the story, I felt ashamed and could not give him a response. I just sat and listened. But I thought a lot about going back to that moment and responding with something other than an embarrassed silence, and I still don't really know what I would say to him. Christians talk a lot, so maybe it won't be words that change his mind about the faith. Then again, maybe he'll want to discuss it again one day. My response might be different. I may tell him I've been the person who's driven by and I've also been the person who's stopped. Meaning, just like everyone else, a person of faith is not immune to making mistakes. And those people he talks about with such distain, those people who drove right past the drunk that day, Christ teaches us that if one of them fell helplessly into a muddy puddle, that we should never walk past them and think, they had it coming. Christ requires us to go one step farther; he requires us to love our enemy, for our enemy is also our neighbor.

As a side note, the day after I included the above anecdote about Greg, it was a Saturday morning and I had to drive my son to a soccer tournament in another community forty-five minutes away. We had to meet the team at 8:30 a.m. in a store parking lot near the soccer pitch to find out where we were going. On the way out the door my wife asked if I'd place a garage sale sign on the post at the four-way stop near our house. As I left the house, a little frustrated because we were already a few minutes late, I grabbed the sign and headed for the door. I quickly drove down to the intersection and jumped out of the car, ran across the street and hammered up the sign. *Good*, I thought as I ran back across the road, *we can still make it on time*. Then a voice came from the other direction, "Excuse me sir, where are you going? I need a ride to Merecroft Street. Can you give me a ride?" I looked over, and saw a disheveled native lady, struggling to walk in a straight line in my direction, like I'd already said yes to her plea. My initial though was that of the priest and the Levite. I had to get my son to his soccer game; I could not make him late for this important game. Then the words that I wrote the day before, Greg's story and Christ's parable returned to my mind. My neighbor needed a ride, because she was still drunk and disoriented from the night before.

She got into the passenger seat, and we took the five-minute ride to Merecroft Street. I introduced her to my son sitting in the back seat, and she said, "Hello, young man. I'm sorry I stink, but I drank last night, I never made it home, and I don't know where I am right now. All I know is that I have to be at work by 11:00." I told her she still had a few hours before she had to start. Then she went on to talk about other jobs she'd lost and said that she could not lose this one. She spoke of wanting a better future, so we talked about accomplishing dreams and the importance of doing a job to the best of one's ability, and the importance of making the most of every opportunity. She sat and listened. Then I dropped her off at a coffee shop two doors down from her place of employment, and she thanked me for the ride and said she'd just go in and drink coffee until her shift started.

We headed away, me with thoughts about what I was going to do if my son's team had already left the meeting spot, and how was I going to find the field? How

was I going to make sure that he got to his soccer game on time if I could not find the field?

Then my son spoke. He did not speak about his excitement for his upcoming game; he spoke in a terribly concerned voice. “Daddy,” he said, “She did not sleep in her own bed last night.”

“No, son,” I replied, “She drank too much, she did not know how to get home, and all her friends left her.”

“She must have been scared,” my ten-year-old said with a quiver in his voice.

“Yes, maybe she was, but she knows where she is now,” I said.

“Daddy, I’m so glad that we were there to help her ... and I never want to drink too much even when I’m older.”

I smiled. “That’s a wise choice son.”

The rest of the drive proved to be the longest teachable moment I’ve experienced with my youngest to that point in his life. He had many questions, and our encounter that morning put him in a place where he listened intently about the way Jesus turned water into wine, about how the Bible instructs us not to be drunk, about how my father and grandfather both faced lifelong struggles with alcoholism. He listened, he asked questions, he interacted, and though the conversation centered on a heavy topic, we never felt weighed down. We talked, we joked, and we expressed concern. And after all was said and done that morning, we pulled into the parking lot at 8:30—right on time—but that didn’t seem to matter as much as the connection we’d made with God, with each other, with a neighbor, on that particular morning.

Raw faith. Christ restores our souls, so that we can be involved in the supernatural next step—sharing with our neighbors. Sometimes, faith is that simple. We want to complicate matters though. We want to ask Christ who our neighbor is, and we want to join in cerebral debates about the tension between faith and works. There is a real danger that exists at the end of this road and the danger is that of busyness and fruitless faith. We engage in conversation, we overthink, and we can take time to do this, but we can’t seem to figure out how to find time to show concern or build relationship with our neighbor.

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Conclusion:

Culture has shifted and so must the culture of Christianity. We’re called to go from spectators to active players. Christ is calling us off injured reserve and the disabled list. And as we’re out on the ice or out on the pitch or the diamond or the field, we have to be ok with not always knowing what the next play is going to be, or how we might respond to the next play. He’s calling us to trust his spirit in our lives. His Spirit in us guides us through each difficult situation.

Who will he use? He calls each one of us—those of us willing to die for Christ and those who need to see his scars, the crowds who’ve thrown down their stones and the redeemed sinner. He’s called us all to serve him at the front lines. One of the

most talented 16th century English poets put it best in his sonnet "On His Blindness". Milton, writer of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* wrote this 14-line poem where he's calling out to God because half way through his life he lost his sight and he wondered how he was to go on writing and using his passion. He accusingly asks, "Does God exact day labor light denied?" Does he still require me to do what he created me to do even though I'm unable to see what I'm doing? Then the answer comes, "Those who bear his mild yolk; they serve him best."