

No Bad Juice

by John Mark Reynolds

John Mark Reynolds:

There's no place I'd rather be than Biola University, the Harvard of the twenty-first century.

[audience cheers and laughs]

Sadly, sadly, Harvard will never be the Biola of the twentieth century, so we can only pity them this morning. My goal is to come in the name of the father and of the son and the Holy Ghost. And may we hear his word as we speak. I have four children under the age of seven, which as a college professor, is planning for the future and job security. I always figure if I can't beat theological liberalism in an argument, I can at least out-breed them.

[audience laughs]

This gives a whole new meaning,

[laughs]

This gives a whole new meaning and a whole new definition to survival of the fittest.

[audience laughs]

Richard Dawkins my selfish genes have reproduced themselves more than yours. And one of my selfish genes was sitting in church with me, and my family, uh, we used to, to get to church, have to drive by a purveyor of adult beverages, and my children would ask me one day why on Sunday all these people were standing outside this store with brown paper bags, what was going on there? And so what I told them was that this was a place where one could buy bad juice. Now, sadly, this idea became very intriguing to everyone in my family. So my children are in the constant lookout everywhere for bad juice.

[audience laughs]

And this weekend we were at Costco where--I'm not advising you go there--there is a sale on Jack Daniels. There is this large display of Jack Daniels and all my children, the three that can talk and walk, circled around this display with everyone there, and began to chant "bad juice, bad juice, bad juice," while my face turned red. And I think people were trying to get stuff out of the cart; "Oh, we were just looking at it. We're gonna [unintelligible]." I'd like to talk about how we really do want bad juice, whatever we may say. I was in church with my three year old Ian Christopher Alban, and he was getting jealous of his little sister and causing a rumpus. So I took him out and was talking to him and I said, "If you're not good, dad will not be able to have communion today. He won't be able to have the Jesus bread and the Jesus juice." And Ian slitted up his eyes so narrowly and in a voice that sounded like it was from The Exorcist said, "I don't want Jesus juice,

[audience laughs]

I want bad juice."

[audience laughs]

Thus proving that total depravity is the most justifiable doctrine in the history of the Christian church.

[audience applauds]

Turn with me, if you will, to Matthew the twenty-second chapter beginning at verse thirty four. Why do we want bad juice and where is it taking us? "When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer"--you always have to look out for the lawyers--"Asked him a question, testing him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to that, to him, "You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets."" May God add to the reading of his word. I'm a person, son of a pastor, grandson of a church elder, great-grandson of a pastor, great-great-grandson of a pastor; back five to six generations in the genes raised by godly parents. Nevertheless, at a particular point in my life, I found that I didn't want God. What I really wanted was bad juice. Not liquor. That wasn't the particular thing I wanted, nor is it probably the particular vice into which most of us will stumble.

I wanted love. That was my particular passion and my voice. I remember when I was so young that I could barely ride a bike, despite the fact that I came from a very secure home where I was loved, riding my bike in circles in the parking lot of the school next to our house, with a sense that somewhere out there there was someone that I could love passionately. I used to write bad poetry to this invisible girl. It's a vice of thirteen and fourteen year old males at a certain age that, angst ridden, we write bad poetry that doesn't rhyme; it's just sort of a sentence chopped up into long things [in staccato, monotone voice]: "I love you like flowers in the rain." And that was me. And if I could have been born again, I wouldn't have been born into the twentieth century. I would have been born into the fifth century, or at least the fifth century that I imagined, when Arthur was lord of Britain. And there were dragons to slay and fair ladies to be won. And that was my particular vice. You see, however beautiful that may sound, this kind of love is just as destructive as the bottle that an alcoholic cradles in a paper bag, because it does not reflect in the end the higher love of heaven, to turn even the proper and passionate love of a husband for his wife into the end, into the telos, into what makes human life worth living, is to make the moon the sun. It is to take what should be the reflected glory of the Son of God and the passionate love for the Son of God, and make it into the center of our own particular solar system.

It is to create an idol, and God is at war with our idols, whether they are a bottle of [unintelligible] on the side of the road, or they are the lady Guinevere in some mysterious Camelot. God will have no other gods before him. There is, I discovered, the hard way. A hierarchy of heaven that begins with a passionate love for God, which makes everything else nothing. You see, I knew all about God. I had grown up in the church. I had said all the right

things. I had gone to more altar calls than most of you had been, been to church services. I had been baptized. I knew about God. But what that made my life move. The passion of my life wasn't so much God as it was love itself. I was in love with love, not with the God who is love. And it isn't good enough to know about God. We have to, in the end, know God himself. That's not in our control. And I wanted my life to be in my control. God comes as he will, as he came to Mary: unexpected, unannounced and said, "I will use you." And our only response to such a God is the response of Mary. It is the response to the great Father: "Do unto me according to your will." We cannot, we must not, in our own strength or in our own work or in our own knowledge, attempt to pull God down from heaven and put him in a box, a box of our own making, a box of our own theologizing a box that we design, because in the words of C.S. Lewis, he is not a tame lion, and he will be God and he will break our boxes, and he will destroy our categories. He must be Lord. He is a selfish and jealous God. And he desires all our passion and all our love.

And this brings us in the end to right order in all of our relationships. I wanted more than anything else, in the language of Sheldon Vanauken in his book *A Severe Mercy*, a "comrade lover," and I was fortunate enough to marry the fairest girl in all of Christendom. The rightest truest woman I have ever known. And when I asked of her for the sort of love that only should belong to God, when I ask her to be my comrade lover, she said, "No, instead, I want to be your wife." And I said, "No. I want not the hierarchy of heaven, not the patriarchy that stretches from paradise to now. I want something else." And so she quietly and silently persisted because she loved God more than she loved me. And eventually, she demonstrated to me the truth that I cannot love my neighbor, or even Christendom's fairest flower, until I have come to love God more than anything else. Until I know him and not just know about him, until I see him and not

just think about him, until he is every beat of my heart, until every cry of my soul is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me a sinner." I must come to that place and that moment. And my wife, more than anyone else on this universe, taught me that. She taught me to see through the eyes of Christ, because when by his grace alone, by faith alone, he comes sometimes even when we haven't invited him, and in ways we can't expect. And he breaks into our lives and breaks into our neat little tidy categories and destroys everything. And he places his mind within us. Then we learn to see everything in a new way.

We learn to see that scripture is central to our understanding of everything else, that the truth of God's word, that truth, helps us to understand every other truth. And in the passionate love we have for God, every other love comes into right order. And the strange and remarkable thing is that in his heart of hearts, he loves us so much that he gives us back the very things we dreamed of. And so when we give up everything to a love for him, he gives it all back to us. And we when we and our human striving attempt to build a Camelot of the heart and when we pursue love at any cost, then like Lancelot and Arthur and Guinevere, we destroy our Camelot and we find ourselves in smoke and ruin. But when we place Jesus first of all, the unfair thing is, is that having given up everything, he gives us back himself, which is more than everything. And then all those things which are our heart's, true longing, it all is returned to us.

My grandmother was married to the same man for 50 years, and somehow this all got lost in the genetic wash. But my grandfather was an exceedingly handsome man, a capable man, a man of wit and interest who told a story better than anyone I know; could just listen to him for hours. And I remember as a little boy sitting out on the front porch, listening him to him tell stories of

our family in the days that had gone before. Just listening. And my grandmother, the matriarch of our clan, would just look at him, and you would understand what love was. But my grandfather grew old and sick and tired, and his body faded and shriveled up. And his hands, which were so large and capable, which built his house with hand tools out of hard yellow oak, became unable even to shake your hand hard enough so that you could feel pressure. And he became incontinent and had to be cared for. And finally, he died, and someone came up to my grandmother at the funeral, and I was sitting behind her, and they meant to be kind, but they looked her straight in the eyes and they said, "It's a pity that Shelby has died, but it must be, in a way, a mercy to you, because you're getting older and caring for him was so hard. And my grandmother, for one brief, shining moment, her back straightened up, her blue eyes became as clear as diamonds, and she said, "I would have done it all for twenty more years for one more minute with him." You see, she had come to love, not him, not the body that was failing; but because she loved Jesus Christ more than anything else, Jesus Christ had revealed to her the real James Shelby Reynolds, the James Shelby Reynolds for whom the gates of paradise swung open, the James Shelby Reynolds who was there even as his body failed. The love of God gave her a love for him that endured past human endurance, that saw him not as he was, and lived in past memories, or saw him just as he was when he was sick and old, but saw him as he really is, and still is, a child of the living God, born again through grace. And entering into paradise.

Let me urge you that if what you want is love, or security, or wealth, or anything else, that none of it can be had or truly understood without first bending the knee and coming to see a vision of Jesus Christ and who he is. Unless we see the good, the true and the beautiful himself, we cannot know what is good, what is true, and what is beautiful. Because truth is ultimately a person. It

isn't an idea; and we must know that person. And so today, I stand before you, and I urge you, as an ill-made knight, as one who came to understand almost too late that what is important is not how I feel or what I want, but what he wants and what he feels, and getting lost in his passionate love. My Lady Fair is here today. My wife, my hope, and I can serve her now truly, because I serve first the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are not in some human-made paradise. We are in the Kingdom of God, in the patriarchy of paradise. We have learned our place, as Milton writes, "in the hierarchy of heaven." And so I bowed the knee before her and offer her my service and my sword. Not because I love her, but because I love first Christ, and Christ has taught me how to love her. And it is true in every relationship of our lives. When the cross is made real to us, by God's grace, when by faith alone, through his great mercy, I come to see him and I learn in my place in his divine order, then and only then, can I find love. Everything is found there: passion, joy, every desire is fulfilled.

We must stand at Biola University for Christ alone. Christ alone. Jesus, my joy. The only hope for salvation. Let us pray. Lord Jesus so often we want bad juice, and the strange thing, is the bad juice that we want never seems bad to us. We place ourselves out of rightful order and we learn to worship things that seem good to us. We worship love. We worship relationships. We worship anything other than you. But you alone are God. And you come to us unbidden and sometimes unannounced, for we cannot control you. You are sovereign, and you stand before us, and you reveal yourself to us. And in that, every relationship comes into right order. And so we pray, Lord Jesus, come to us. May we see you as you are. And may we come to know you in Jesus' holy name. Amen.