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# A Measure of *Grace*

A Publication of Where Grace Abounds

## How Far is Too Far?

*by Roger Jones*

When people, Christians in particular, are dating, the question eventually comes up, “How far is too far?” This is of course in reference to the physical boundaries in a dating relationship. It may be asked using different words: Is kissing okay? What kind of kissing is appropriate? When is it okay to kiss and for how long? Where exactly can I put my hands, and where exactly should I *not* put my hands? Or do the hands matter at all? Is there a difference between petting and “heavy” petting? Does oral sex count as sex? Or, to simplify, How far is too far?

I’m sure this has been a dilemma for people since the beginning of time. Arranged marriages, where the couple getting married may never have even met before their wedding day,

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probably helped to reduce the questioning! Technically, they were having sex on the first date, but this was because their first date was their wedding. Commitment came first and meant something more permanent than it often does now. In other times, men and women were never left alone without a chaperone. Today, we are often left to figure out the boundaries for ourselves. It is not uncommon to date for a year or longer prior to becoming engaged, and then there is sometimes a long engagement. It is no wonder that our understanding of the boundaries can get blurry.

I find myself wondering if “How far is too far?” is truly the question that is really being asked at all. Perhaps a more honest way of stating the question would be something like, “How much can I get away with and not sin?” Isn’t that what we are really asking when we want to know the precise location of the physical boundaries?

Paul states in I Corinthians 6:12 that “everything is permissible to me, but not everything is beneficial.” I think sometimes we stop reading this verse after the “everything is permissible” part.

Grace covers everything, right? Grace washes away sin, but unfortunately, we are often left with the consequences of our choices. When we say, “you’re not worth waiting for” with our actions, trust cannot develop fully and wholly. When we go “too far” in a dating relationship, guilt and shame show up as unwelcome visitors. Questions about where the boundaries lie do nothing to address the internal issues of the heart.

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For myself in my struggle with homosexuality, I found that the clear physical boundaries I thought I had quickly fell away. Upon reflection, I now recognize at least part of the reason this happened. My decision to compromise my values had occurred long before I ever became physical with someone. It happened first in my mind and in my heart, when I chose to look to another person to meet my needs, rather than wait for whatever God’s provision for me might have been. Because I had already compromised so much, it was easy to give up on the rest of my values regarding sexuality as well.

I imagine that this is true in heterosexual relationships too. The inten-

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sity of attraction and emotion that comes with a new relationship can be intoxicating. We let our hearts and minds rush forward in the excitement of it all. Our values and beliefs become secondary to the other person. We want to be close to our significant other, so we begin to let go of our convictions one by one. A significant boundary gets crossed along the way (whatever that may be), and guilt and shame come. If I've already gone too far, why not go further? I feel convicted about my choices, but when I'm with my partner, I can forget about how badly I feel, if only for a little while.

For the past several months, I have been dating a woman I have known for quite a few years. I find that I am much more conservative about the physical boundaries within our relationship than I ever thought I would be. Because of my past experiences and what I have heard from others, I am committed to not bringing a bunch of guilt and shame into this relationship. If we get married, I hope it will be a celebration we can feel good about. If we do not get married, the physical part of our relationship will be less difficult to sever, because we won't have given ourselves to each other in a sexual way.

In his book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Joshua Harris says, "Purity is

a direction, not a line we suddenly cross by 'going too far.' The enemy of your soul would love to mar the beauty of your blossoming love by leading you down a path of lust and sexual compromise. Please don't give him a foothold." I like this quotation, because it gives a framework for a different question than "How far is too far?"

Perhaps a better question is, "How can I honor God and my partner?" I leave you with a passage that seems fitting for the topic:

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. I Corinthians 13:4-7, NIV*



## A Little Electrasol for the Heart

*By Scott Kingry*

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*"You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also."  
Matthew 23:26*

Oh, those Pharisees, the ultra-religious folks of Jesus' day that He likened to blind guides, whitewashed tombs, serpents and a whole list of other not so complimentary names. He sure did seem to yell at them a lot—even though these guys were experts at keeping most of God's standards, an admirable feat that even on my best day looks rather improbable. I guess that was a good part of their problem, doing all the "right" things, looking extra shiny and beautiful on the outside. That was why Jesus, in the middle of His long rant at the Pharisees in Matthew 23, suddenly started giving a lesson on what seems to be washing dishes. No matter how nice the outside "image" is, the heart is still filled with robbery and self-indulgence (vs.25). The story sounds familiar.

I vividly remember sitting in my high school Bible study, discussing with wide eyed horror and know-it-all adolescent amusement the plight of these "religious dudes" and Jesus' justified railings. "Pharisee" was synonymous with everything evil—hypocrisy, self righteousness and pride. After an energetic dialog on the matter, our time would close with a prayer in which we thanked God we were not like them.



Five seconds later, we'd attend our youth group, jam at Christian concerts, help with the children's program at church and dutifully carry our Bibles though the school halls. We were shiny, happy people. When classmates criticized us for being judgmental and didn't seem to appreciate our ample advice on how to get their lives together like we had, we were relieved, even congratulatory at the persecution we were suffering for preaching the "Gospel of Christ." Meanwhile, as this helpful life changing ministry was happening, along with all the shininess and happiness, I was secretly struggling with my sexuality in some very profound ways. I had been wrestling with homosexual feelings for years by then and had just recently stopped a long sexual relationship with another guy friend. Pornography resided in a hidden stash that I still dipped into occasionally, leaving me shamed and confused. Wow—this just screams "whitewashed tomb!" Why is it that I can intellectually understand the concept of a "Pharisee" and still run right out and be one? No wonder Jesus was so pissed.

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It would appear that Christians have been wrestling with this ambivalent dilemma and the consequences for millennia. I ran across an interesting article on the internet, “Conservative Porn,” which serves as a good illustration.

*A new nationwide study of anonymous credit-card receipts from a major online adult entertainment provider finds little variation in consumption between states. However, there are some trends to be seen in the data. Those states that do consume the most porn tend to be more conservative and religious than states with lower levels of consumption ... people who are most outraged turn out to be consumers of the very things they claim to be outraged by. Churchgoers bought less online porn on Sundays—a 1% increase in a postal code’s religious attendance was associated with a 0.1% drop in subscriptions that day. Not to worry, though: expenditures on other days of the week brought churchgoers in line with the rest of the country.*

Now you never know if everything you read on the internet is true. But with all kinds of scandals, including the sexual ones, that have wreaked havoc throughout Christian history, this doesn’t seem to be too much of a stretch. Once again the question remains—why do people who sincerely love God and want to serve Him with their lives deteriorate into the life of a Pharisee? Christians are famous for running around exhaustively doing and saying all the “right” things, fighting the “right” battles, dutifully reading Scripture and having their quiet times, while condemning and critiquing the culture around them. Yet below the many secret behaviors and addictions, the “inside of the cup” (our hearts) con-

tinues to be a conflicted dark mess. The greatest temptation we face is not the daily scourge of desires that take us off the path, but to hide behind a glossy image while we’re sinning.

What’s the remedy? Jesus points it out in His “dish washing” lesson—clean the inside of the cup (deal with our hearts) and then the outside (behavior) will be clean also. A frequent misconception of folks when they first come to Where Grace Abounds is that they’re here to deal with a certain “unwanted behavior.” If they can just get control of their addictions (which they mistakenly think should take 3 months at most), then things will be fine. That’s the problem Jesus is referring to—just dealing with our behavior (a very good thing, by the way) never addresses any underlying issues, the heart matters that take us away from Him. We know here at WGA that’s a big load to tackle and untangle. The things that drive the addictions are many—wounds from our past relationships, abuse, feelings of shame and inadequacy and the legitimate need for love. Unpacking these things takes time, along with a helpful daily dose of confession and repentance. Maybe we can use as our models the surprisingly changed Pharisees Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. After skulking around in the dark to engage with Jesus, they ended up living transparently in the light and found out that a little Electrasol for the heart is good thing.

## Caught in Sin

*By Mary Heathman*

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*(Note: this article is an updated version of one published in the WGA newsletter in June of 2000. I offer it again because it so closely parallels current conversations with ministry leaders and group members. It is humbling to see how complacent we can be to the same old sins!)*

A friend of mine wrote in an email, "I saw you this morning. I was beside you on the Park Ave exit headed toward Coors Field. Then I was behind you until you proceeded straight ahead from the left turn only lane."

My response to him was quick. "That exit bugs me since they put in the turn lane. If you wait in the other lanes, it often takes 3 cycles to get through because of the congestion, while you watch others in the turn lane ignore the signs and drive right on through the intersection. So, it is a mini-rebellion I allow myself every morning!"

Do you see the rationalizations here as I justify my behavior? I was caught in sin, and trying to

explain it away! Comparing myself to others, I blamed my sin on bad traffic rules, and other drivers who sinned worse or more often than I did.

*(2009 update: I no longer disobey that traffic rule, but the habit didn't change until I got a ticket for it. Apparently there are some sins that I just won't abandon until the painful consequences override the perceived benefits. "Lord, may my heart change so that this won't always be so.")*

One of these days I hope to mature in the Lord to the point that when I am caught in sin, I will quickly submit, confess, and turn from the sin without putting up a fight and trying to wiggle out of it.

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, turn from their wicked ways and pray, I will hear their prayers and heal their land." If I humble myself, turn from my rebellion and pray, God will hear my prayer and heal my land.

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What a promise, what a simple plan for the healing of our land! If God's people, those who are called by His name, will humble ourselves, turn from our sin, and pray, He will hear and respond with healing.

The scripture is familiar. I've heard it taught many times. I used it in the prayer I wrote for a National Day of Prayer gathering in which I spoke. The dissonance between that scripture and my own prayers still haunts me—my first impulse is still to scramble out of a situation instead of humbling myself.

I think I should have gone back and said to my friend, "I know I should have obeyed the traffic signals. I've developed a habit of doing that at that intersection and you caught me red-handed. I think I'll drive another route to work until I get over my bout with self-will in this kind of situation."

Whether it is traffic signals, road rage, parking violations—or sexual sins like adultery, entertaining lust, or indulging in all manner of

sinful sexual behavior, aren't we a people who scramble to justify ourselves, or blame others. . or even accuse God of lacking love, as evidenced by His "repressive rules?"

This fall in our *Going Deeper With God* group, we are talking about honesty with ourselves, God and each other. I think I am in the school of the Spirit, learning anew how easily I fall prey to dishonesty. It is my hope that as our group studies together, you will pray for me, that my heart will line up with the truth we are exploring!

Will you join me in a commitment to humbling ourselves, turning from our wicked ways, whatever they are, and praying for the healing of ourselves and our land? "If we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

That's what I want -- the simplicity of obedience or quick confession and repentance when I disobey. May the Lord change my heart and make it so!

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## **September**

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### **At a Glance**

**September 12th: WGA spoke at First Denver Friends Church**

**September 15th: WGA Pastor Training Event**

**September 12th: Men's Event**

**September 19th: Facilitator training**

**September 19th: WGA Event: Corn Maze**

## **October**

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### **And Beyond**

**October 3rd: Intercessory Prayer. Join us from 7:00—9:00 am at the WGA offices**

**October 9-11th: WGA Leadership Retreat**

**October 11th: WGA participating in missions event at First Denver Friends and Cherry Creek Presbyterian Church**

**November 7th: Intercessory Prayer. Join us from 7:00—9:00 am at the WGA offices**

**November 17th: WGA Pastor Training Event**

#### **Thursday Night Group**

**September 3rd: 40**  
**September 10th: 40**  
**September 17th: 39**  
**September 24th: 40**

**Orientation meeting: 4 new people**

#### **WGA Staff**

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**Janet Moine**  
Asst Program Director

**Mary Heathman**  
Founding Director

*A Measure of Grace*  
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*Where Grace Abounds*  
exists to guide and support  
men and women who seek to  
understand sexuality and  
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all people to know and  
personally appropriate  
God's plan for their  
sexuality and relationships.

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