

Grace for the Day

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Michael Jackson: A Tragedy

By Rev. Peter Eng

Preamble

Most of my readers may be aware that I am no fan of Michael Jackson. Yes, like his other non-fans, I find the media coverage of his death an obscene fixation on a life that is wasted. When there are so many more important things, the media wastes time with a wasted life.

I don't enjoy Jackson's songs, I don't know what they are, and even when I listen to one, I don't know it is a Jackson song. But, when it is pointed out to me that Jackson is the singer, it is apparent to me that he is talented. Even outsiders to the pop culture, such as I, know that he had a great impact on the music and dance scene. His talent is not in dispute. That he wasted his life should also not be in dispute. Like the other great singer before him, Elvis Presley, he squandered his God-given talent on self indulgence.

Once we put this into words, we begin to see that we are not unlike Jackson in his core failure. We should note that this was the first temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness.

Jesus' Use of His Ability

Before Jesus began his ministry proper, he went into the wilderness, and fasted and prayed for forty days. At the end of that time, the devil came to him and tempted him. Satan understood that Jesus was hungry and much in need of food. Some of the stones around them looked like bread. Satan asked Jesus to turn the stones into bread, but Jesus refused, saying, "A person shall not live on bread alone" (Matt 4:1-4; Lk 4:1-4).

What does this mean? After all, Jesus later did a food miracle by feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. Why should it be wrong for Jesus to use his miraculous power to turn the stones into bread and feed himself? If there is any legitimate need, it must be the need for food.

The issue here is not the need but the means. The ability to perform miraculous signs was given with a purpose. Jesus was to use that ability to serve others and to demonstrate that he was God in human flesh. While he was clothed in humanity, his needs should be satisfied by ordinary means. For Jesus to use his ability to perform miracles for his own benefit would be an abuse of this ability.

We do not have the ability of Jesus to perform miraculous signs. But we are also endowed with God-given talents and abilities. Some of these abilities may be truly remarkable. The important question we have to ask is how we use what God has given us. We are easily tempted to abuse God's goodness.

Man's Abuse of God-given Ability

We all have power. The employer has power over the employees because he can fire them. The employee has power over the employer because he can do things to sabotage the work. The church leaders have power over the members because they claim God's authority and can discipline the members. The members have power over the leaders because they can walk away and give a bad report about them.

What is your special talent? How do you use it? If you are good with numbers, do you use it to help others or to cheat? If you are good with music, do you use it to bless or to blast (as did Jackson in Vol. 2 of his album "HIStory.")? If you are successful in show biz, do you self-indulge or pass on your success to the less fortunate (e.g. adoptions, foundations, etc.)? If you are a sharp witted lawyer, do you use your gift to support the right or set free the guilty?

Concerning how we use what we have, a person does not have to be a Christian to do what is right. Conversely, being a Christian does not automatically mean we make better use of what God has given us. The

Word of God calls us to recognize our own limitations on how we handle our station in life: "... give me neither poverty nor riches, / but give me only my daily bread. / Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you / and say, 'Who is the LORD?' / Or I may become poor and steal, / and so dishonor the name of my God." (Prov. 30:8-9).

Many of us cannot handle success, or talent, or wealth. When we look at the fortunes of those who strike lottery, the majority lose all their wealth in a short time. This is because most people cannot handle wealth. We abuse it, and we indulge when we have plenty. By the same token, very few can handle power. In this regard, George Washington was put to the test. King George III asked Benjamin West what Washington would do if he gained independence from Britain. West said Washington planned to return to his farm. The king was incredulous. "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world." (David Boaz, "The man who would not be king.")

Washington defeated the British through his perseverance, a strength of character that should be recognized. His success, however, should not be diminished. In my view, his greatest triumph was over human nature: a nature that never wants to hand over power. Which successful warrior stepped down? Caesar, Augustus, Lenin, Napoleon, Cromwell, all held on to power. Washington stepped down. His adversary, King George III, might have overstated it, but there can be no doubt that

Washington's ability to give up power is a strong example of not abusing the popularity he enjoyed.

Our observation is that talent, wealth, ability, power, or any other blessing is prone to abuse. It is well known that the police sometimes abuse their power. They are given power to enforce the law, but that power can be so easily abused. What about teachers and professors? Do they not have power they can abuse also?

Jackson had a lot of talent, a lot of money, a lot of fans, and at some point, he fell into the abyss of abusive indulgence. Admiration for his talent without regard for his wasted life would be out of place. His life failure was the result of his career success.

As he passed into eternity, his excesses and failures overshadow his success. What is true about Jackson is that he was a larger than life representation of the abuse of God-given blessing. Less we judge him too harshly, we need to ask how we also will indulge if we have his success. Our indulgences and failures will be different, but most of us, like Jackson, will allow our success to destroy us. Perhaps the only reason why we are not a tragedy on Jackson's colossal scale is that we do not have his considerable talent.

Jesus calls us to refocus. How do we use God-given abilities? They should be guided by "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

Qualitatively, most of us are like Jackson. We abuse what God gives us. Quantitatively, Jackson's failure is

more conspicuous than ours because we have less to abuse.

Jesus our Lord set the example for us in his victory over temptation. We need to have a strong sense of gratitude for what God has given us, and a deep commitment not to abuse his blessing to us.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.