



Renovaré BOOK CLUB

Getting Our Faith “Unstuck”

By James Catford

We need to talk about Mundanus, who we meet in chapter 14. He’s “a man of clear apprehension” and, over a long life, he has done well out there in the marketplace. So much so that “every part of trade and business that has fallen in his way has had some improvement from him” and he sprinkles stardust on everything he touches.

As a perfectionist, Mundanus throws himself into improving his trading position, his property, his extensive back yard and his profitable manufacturing business. According to William Law “he is constantly improving by often digesting his thoughts in writing and trying everything every way, rendered him a great master of most concerns in human life”.

Do you have a Mundanus in your street, workplace, community or church?

We have a problem with Mundanus. Why? Because “the only thing that has not fallen under his improvement is his devotion.” So much so that, when it comes to his life with God, he reverts back to a small boy, aged six. For example, when he prays he uses the same form of words that his mother taught him. And for all his sophistication, he “has gone all his life long praying in the same manner as when he was a child”.

At first, this primitive faith seems very laudable, especially if we have an idealised view of Jesus with neat and manicured children all around him. As it happens, my own faith journey started out as a small child in a lively Sunday school where I was drawn to the attractiveness of Jesus; ever loving and always accepting. I am profoundly thankful to God for this.

Yet, what troubles William Law is that Mundanus has got stuck there. He associates his learning how to pray with learning how to spell. So, when he sees a fabulous book like Richard Foster's *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, he’s likely to look away. Why would he want to go back there?

The challenge for Mundanus, and many people like him, is that there’s no equality between the faith of a six-year old and the serious issues of life today. It's not a fair fight. And many people struggle with (or even walk away from) God because their immature faith cannot carry the weight of their complex lives.

Truth be told, nurturing a deep, personal and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ is grown-up stuff. And when it comes to our spiritual formation, we have the responsibility for placing ourselves in a place where God can change us. As Dallas Willard would say occasionally, “God is not going to blow our nose for us”.



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Law recognised the seriousness of his serious call. "For as philosophy professes purely the search and inquiry after knowledge, so Christianity supposes, intends, desires and aims at nothing else but the raising of fallen people to a divine life, to such habits of holiness, such degrees of devotion as may fit them [for] heaven".

Supposes, intends, desires and aims at nothing else. Law's audacious invitation is to pull on our big girl or big boy pants and step into the gritty and granular life that becoming more like Jesus involves. Most certainly there are truckloads of grace available and Jesus is more than able to help us face the tough stuff of real life. That's why Law introduces us to so many of his friends.

There's Miranda who has discovered the transformative value of spiritual support bubbles or societies in chapter nine. There's the devout and heavenly minded combat soldier along with the zealous, faithful and laborious church pastor who we meet in chapter ten.

Contrast them with Caelia who, in chapter eleven, is so full of her own troubles that she goes pale and her lips start to tremble when Lupus ignores her and only speaks to Lucinda. Or Flatus who is always uneasy and searching, and Succus who lives to eat and sleep in chapter twelve.

Sitting in a car once in busy central London, Dallas Willard contrasted for me the difference between a life *without* God and a life *with* God. "You see," he said, "secular life without God cannot deal with the fine texture of our lived experience." And that's Law's point. He is trying to set out a compelling vision of what our lives could become if we press hard after Jesus Christ.

William Law's close contemporary John Wesley faced the same set of social realities and was also intent on ravaging ordinary Christians with an overwhelming picture of what life would look like if we took the words of Christ seriously. In graphic terms intended to shock his friends, Jesus said, "unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you won't have life within you".

Here's how Wesley put it when a skeptic said to him, "I hear you preach to a great number of people every night and morning. Pray, what would you do with them? Where would you lead them? What religion do you preach? What is it good for?"

Wesley replied, yes, "I do preach to as many as desire to hear every night and morning. You ask what I would do with them. I would make them virtuous and happy, easy in themselves and useful to others. Where would I lead them? To heaven; to God the judge, the lover of all, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant.



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"What religion do I preach? The religion of love; the law of kindness brought to light by the Gospel. What is it good for? To make all who receive it enjoy God and themselves: to make them like God; lovers of all; content in their lives; and crying out at their death, in calm assurance 'O grave, where is thy victory! Thanks be unto God, who gives me the victory, through my Lord Jesus Christ.'"¹

Virtuous and happy... easy in ourselves and useful to others... enjoying God and ourselves... lovers of all and content in our lives. If that's what a devout and holy life looks like then wouldn't more people in the marketplace, like Mundanus, take it seriously? Surely it's the best deal on the table.

But first, for this to happen, the way that the Gospel is taught, heard, understood and practiced needs to change. A more credible and grown up Jesus would need to prevail.

No wonder Octavius in chapter thirteen prefers to enjoy his fine wines and Cognatus becomes a moneymaking clergyman. Together with so many others they make a categorical error about what is the good life, and how to get it.

Law used his considerable communication skills to wake up a generation that locked Jesus in a box and shielded him from messy lives and messy people. A Jesus that is limited "just for the children," or "just for Sunday," or just for the religious enthusiasts "who like that sort of thing'."

Only when we embrace a fully rounded devotion to Jesus will we be in a fair fight with the challenges and demands of our broken lives today. When we do this, we will discover that, wherever we draw the line between what is holy and unholy, between who has got it made and who hasn't, Jesus is the same. He's always to be found on the other side of the lines.

BONUS MATERIAL:

William Law was anxious to take Jesus way beyond the confines of the church and see him equally at home in the marketplace. In the [Bonus Material this week](#) we catch up with the Victorian writer and thinker John Ruskin, who influenced Dallas Willard when it came to character formation and the business world.

For anyone in work, and also for those who care for them, read about the way character meets life outside our usual Christian circles. Some people shrug their shoulders in resignation and say that "business is business." But what, asks Ruskin and Willard, would professionals like physicians, lawyers, the military and those in business be willing to die for?

¹ *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*. 1743. Works, V.