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Culminating Themes and Universal Love

By James Catford

Law on Gender

I always wince slightly when a classic author from a bygone age attempts to say anything about gender. I pry open the pages gingerly, not sure what social disgraces are about to leap out.

It's often here that we find the greatest distance between our world and the world of history's greatest writers. The same would be true of the most enduring works of fiction by someone like Daniel Defoe, the author of *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*, as it is of his close contemporary William Law.

How, I wonder, will future generations judge our own age on the scale of inclusivity, and where should we place Law?

Women, writes Law, "are not suffered to compete with us [men] in the arts and sciences of learning and eloquence, in which I have much suspicion they would often prove our superiors." He goes on, "for I believe it may be said that for the most part there is a finer sense, a clearer mind, a readier apprehension, and gentler disposition among women than among the generality of men" (121).

Not so bad? Well, in chapter nineteen Law condemns the lack of education for women in his day "which deprives them of the benefits of their excellent natures." And while his character Matilda is so worried about the appearance of her daughters that "if a pimple rises in their faces she is greatly distressed," (122) in our own body-conscious society the same could equally be said of boys.

Matilda appears to be a pushy parent similar to some that we see today. Her eldest daughter died under such an oppressive regime and her youngest ran away with a handsomely dressed dancer and "gamester." I didn't know that gaming was a pursuit in those days. It all sounds rather familiar.

If Law has been doing well so far, he seems to blow it all with Eusebia who teaches her daughters "all kinds of activities that are proper for women — such as sewing, knitting, spinning" (123). But before we reject this book entirely because the author is so clearly out of touch with twenty-first century values, we should note that crafting is not offered here as an idle leisure pursuit but as a means to financial independence and emancipation. Ahead of his time? You decide.



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The Internal War

It's interesting that it is in a chapter on "educating our daughters" that Law gets to the heart of the universal "internal war" that besets both men and women alike. No unconscious bias here. This is the war of "two hearts within us: with one we see, taste, and admire reason, purity and holiness: with the other we incline to pride, vanity, and sensual delights" (124).

Law doesn't dismiss or despise our physical bodies. Unlike some writers, he didn't go to the aesthetic school of self-loathing. But what does trouble him is the man "who would rather have a laced coat than a healthy body" (124).

Inside Out

Throughout *A Serious Call*, Law's hierarchy of needs starts with a well-ordered soul, followed by a healthy mind and body, and then our outer garments and social place in the world. In doing this he maps closely onto other spiritual teachers that came both before and after him.

Jesus himself counselled that a good tree cannot bear bad fruit (Matthew 7: 18). Later he said that if we clean the inside of the cup then the outside will generally take care of itself (Matthew 23: 26). Start at the center and move outwards, rather than trying fanatically to control the outside while losing the internal war within.

In our own day, Richard Foster sets out the six great traditions of the church in a very deliberate order. First is prayer or the contemplative life, then comes holiness or the virtuous life, this is then followed by the charismatic or Spirit-empowered life. Step into these three streams of the church and the compassionate life of the social justice tradition will become much more viable. This turns into the perfect platform for the evangelical or the word-centered life, which finally leads to a holistic, incarnational or sacramental life lived out there in the wider world.¹

Put simply, what Jesus, Law, and Foster are saying is that the route to fullness and fruitfulness runs through a well-ordered soul and a considered life. So whether we want to be an evangelist, a social activist, or someone living for Christ in the marketplace, the message is the same—become a contemplative first. Sort out who you are on the inside and work from there.

Understood correctly, the purpose of education in chapter eighteen becomes clear. It is to learn how to become a Christ-centered "Reflective Executive."²

Starting from the center and working outwards also makes sense of the "universal love" that Law describes in chapter twenty-one. As both Richard Foster and Dallas Willard have



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said in their own way, "The purpose of God in history is the formation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with Jesus Christ at the center as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant." That's quite a mouthful to remember, but is it so very different to universal love?

Not only does Law's basic structure include this great vision, it also makes it possible.

Core Exercises

As we know from the science of fitness, it all starts from the core and from doing our core exercises. That's why, in chapters twenty-two and twenty-three, Law offers a simple routine for our waking hours that both begins and ends with prayer. And while we may not necessarily choose the same themes for our prayer life, we can surely adopt a similar rhythm where we gradually build up our frequency of checking in with God throughout our day.

"I will set the Lord always before me" said the Psalmist (16: 8). But let's not invent some kind of piety scorecard and beat up on ourselves when we miss our daily target. This is grace, not law, and all we seek to do is lovingly improve on our average.

Some people I know set an alarm on their phone to help them remember to pray at midday. Others take the stairs in the office and turn the moment into a brief prayer walk, or use standing in line to touch base with God in a short breath prayer (inhale deeply and slowly while focusing on Jesus, exhale deeply and fully while inviting his grace into our day).

These are habits we can learn quite easily. Dallas Willard taught me to wake up in the morning praying. It's really not that hard. And when I was working in a pressurised office, even waiting by the photocopier was a lifeline for me. These are some simple ways we can fold God into our lives or, to put it more accurately, to fold our lives into God.

In all this, if William Law has anything to teach us, our resolve remains the same—"to keep the center, center." Surely this is the enduring vision of his serious call to a devout and holy life.

¹ Foster, Richard, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne), 2001.

² I have borrowed the phrase "Reflective Executive" from the title of an Emilie Griffin book.