

Taking Captive Every Thought

Number 3. On reading great literature in general

Taking Captive Every Thought is a series of papers published by Three Rivers Grace Community Church to encourage believers to pursue the goal stated in the Scriptures (II Cor. 10:5) and reiterated by the leaders of the Reformation: to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord in all areas of life. The papers therefore deal with a variety of aspects of life and how to bring them into submission to Christ.

The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.

—Mark Twain

Read any good books lately? More importantly, what makes a book “good?” What most people look for in a book is something diverting or entertaining. Very often, they deliberately avoid things that are lengthy, or deal with weighty subjects, or do not feature passionate romance or flashy military technology, or are old enough to contain words or styles that are no longer common. In short, most people look for “light reading.”

Why is this? Why is “heavy reading” something most people actively avoid? Consider again what light reading does: it diverts and entertains for as long as it takes to read. But does it “make you think?” Does it enrich the spirit or the mind? Can it delight a person with newfound understanding, teach him unexpected things, make him realize for the first time that others do not necessarily share certain of his desires, his goals, and his views—in short, break him out of the smallness of his way of life? No; indeed, we could almost consider it the definition of light reading, that it does not do these things. Heavy reading demands more of the reader, but gives him immeasurably more in return.

So we can see the things heavy reading offers us, and that most people do not seek them. But should they? Should we? Is there any reason that we should, in fact, look for these very things? The Scriptures urge us to get wisdom and understanding (Pr. 4:5). Certainly, they mean wisdom and understanding in the things of God. But is not all truth God's truth, all wisdom His wisdom, and all understanding His

understanding? “Whatever you do...in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17). We are to do everything in a way that glorifies Him: not just churchgoing, praying, and evangelizing, but even socializing, television and film viewing, music listening, and reading. In our reading, we can glorify Him by choosing works that increase our understanding of both Him and the world He created, and make us wiser people. In short, we can choose great literature.

What is “great” about great literature? For one thing, it is heavy reading. It deals in meaningful ways with the human condition: man's innate knowledge of the existence of God and the spiritual world, the problem of good and evil, the need for justice, mercy, intimacy, and meaning, the problem of human suffering, and the like. Great works deal maturely with these themes, avoid stereotypes and surface judgments, and generally are written in styles that are refined but not showy. Great fiction features well-developed characters, and by the chain of events it glorifies the good they do, and disdains the evil. Great nonfiction offers intelligent and insightful arguments. Both genres educate us by exposing us to other points of view, possibly ones we did not know existed. They show us how persons unlike us, often in other countries or different eras, deal with the same struggles we deal with today. By showing how we differ from others, they also highlight the things we have in common—teaching us which aspects of our own lives are truly universal, what some have called the “permanent things.”

It is possible, then, broadly, to objectively judge books. We can state objectively that the works of Jane Austen are better than those of

THREE RIVERS

GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
(412)833-9677

Danielle Steel. Those of Fyodor Dostoyevsky are objectively better than those of Tom Clancy. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* are objectively more worthwhile than the political essays in *Newsweek*.

Unfortunately, what is heavily marketed is rarely the best literature available. If we are to read great literature, we will have to go and get it; publishers are not going to "bring it to us" by way of flashy publicity. Western civilization has produced the largest body of great literature in the world. If you enjoy romance, why not try Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*? If you enjoy mystery or suspense, why not try Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, or Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*? If you enjoy women authors, why not try Sigrid Undset's Nobel Prize-winning *Kristin Lavransdatter* and *The Master of Hestviken*? If you like works of history, why not read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*? If you enjoy topical essays, why not read Samuel Johnson's *The Rambler*? And if you hated *Moby Dick* in school, you just might find that you can enjoy it now that no one is forcing you to read it. The store of great literature is inexhaustible in a lifetime: fiction (e.g., Swift, Fielding, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Dickens, Tolstoy), biography (Plutarch, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*), poetry (Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Auden, T. S. Eliot), not to mention political writings, criticism, history, philosophy, science, and other genres. There is an ocean of great books, too seldom sought, and immersing ourselves in it can make us better people. We would do much better to spend our reading time on it, than on the alternatives.

At this point, some will take me to be inverting the cliché, and saying, "If it feels good, don't do it!" On the contrary, I say, "Do the other, and you will eventually find that it feels even better!" A reader unfamiliar with great works may find them less enjoyable at first, but enjoyment will come with time (meanwhile, the intellectual and spiritual benefits will be immediate). When someone reared on a bland or restricted diet encounters a new food, it is understandable if he does not like the taste of it. But he should then ask whether the deficiency is in the food, or in his own insufficiently developed taste. In the same way, if we find that we dislike a certain book, then there is a deficiency somewhere. It is either in the book, or in our taste—that is the question to be decided. If it is in the book, then

of course our dislike is correct, but if it is in our taste, then we need to make a change. And to decide the question, we need a criterion for evaluation. If we believe that all things are "from Him and through Him and to Him" (Rom. 11:36), then we will subject our taste to a higher standard: "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). If our minds recognize that great literature is more enriching than light reading, then we should act on that, even if our hearts are skeptical. Later on, we will find our hearts convinced also, by the benefits we realize. "All books will become light in proportion as you find light in them."¹ In short, our taste will change for the better, if we acknowledge what is good and pursue it.

Some, who may admit the benefits of great literature, still feel it is not worth the time. I know of a woman who long felt her hands were full trying to rear two small children, read the Bible, and do other necessary things, and that reading great literature was not worthwhile. Eventually, however, she was persuaded to read Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. She was surprised to find her own struggles, joys, and fears reflected in its characters, and to find herself increasing in wisdom. Your own experience just might turn out to be the same. The result of great minds, writing in creative ways about the great questions of the human race, is an enriching experience scarcely to be equalled.

Where is the truest enjoyment to be found? Is it not in acknowledging God to be all He is, and therefore desiring our devotion to Him to be all it can be, and so, likewise, seeking to develop the full potential He has given each of us? Let us then read great literature—for the sheer enjoyment of it.

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1. Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book*. This is an excellent resource on how to get the most out of great literature. Also helpful are *Invitation to the Classics*, by Cowan and Guinness, and *The New Lifetime Reading Plan*, by Clifton Fadiman.