



Infinite Passion by Ron Julian

Gutenberg tutor Ron Julian gave this talk to Gutenberg's graduating class on June 12, 2015.

Today I want to talk about passion. Now I know what you may be thinking. This is a graduation speech. I'm going to talk about "passion." That means I am going to inspire you to "follow your passion." I will urge you to find out what you are most passionate about and seek to make that your career. Passion is the key to a rewarding life. Or perhaps, if I am a contrarian by nature, I could urge you *not* to follow your passion. I could warn you that following your passion is a good way to end up living in your parents' basement. Instead, concentrate on getting a stable, well paying job. Passion is for the weekends. This, however, is not the sort of passion I have in mind.

I decided on this topic of "passion," by thinking back on what you and I have read together. I found myself thinking about two passages. These two passages speak of the defining passion of our lives. One is a passage from Kierkegaard (of course). One is a passage from Augustine.

The first passage, the Kierkegaard passage, comes from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. You and I spent a year looking at *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* together. You will remember that Kierkegaard deliberately writes this work in a way that is challenging to understand. Every now and then, however, he makes a summary, clarifying statement that captures the essence of what he is talking about—a statement that truly captures what Kierkegaard himself actually believes. I think this is one such clarifying

statement, where he tells us what it means to be a Christian:

Christianity is spirit; spirit is inwardness; inwardness is subjectivity; subjectivity is essentially passion, and at its maximum an infinite, personally interested passion for one's eternal happiness.

Let's follow the progression of his thought: "Christianity is spirit." That is, Christianity is about the human person. Even though Christianity talks about God and creation and the flow of history, it relates those things to us as persons. Christianity confronts us with issues of the spirit, what it means to be a human being.

Then he says, "spirit is inwardness." That is, the focus of Christianity is on the inner person, the heart, the will. The focus is not on the externals of human existence. The focus is on what we are inside: what we believe, what we want, what we choose to do.

Then he says, "inwardness is subjectivity." The distinction between objectivity and subjectivity is a huge one for Kierkegaard. Let me try to make it clear. Suppose that God were to provide me with a massive amount of objective evidence that Christianity is true. The evidence is overwhelming. Jesus rose from the dead. There were video cameras at the grave. All the evidence proves that Christianity is *objectively* true. That still doesn't determine what I personally, *subjectively* am going to do with it. No amount of objective evidence is powerful enough to determine my subjective choice. To be a Christian means to make the personal, subjective choice to believe.



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Kierkegaard then says, "subjectivity is essentially passion." That is, Christianity is subjective because, essentially, Christianity is all about your passion. Being a Christian is all about *what you want*, what you *desire*, what you are *willing* to choose.

And finally, Kierkegaard fills out this concept of passion: it is "at its maximum an infinite, personally interested passion for one's eternal happiness." Christianity is about passion, about what you want. But it is about an *infinite* passion. That is, it is an *unending* passion, a desire that never runs out. This passion doesn't cool as we get older and more sophisticated. We don't say about this desire, "OK, that is enough of that. Let's not go overboard." It is a passion that we will follow all the way to the end. It is also a "personally interested passion for one's eternal happiness." We don't want to be misled about the word "happiness." In our time, the word "happy" has shrunk to mean merely cheerful, smiling, feeling good. But the more fundamental meaning of the word has to do with being fortunate, blessed. Happiness means having good and desirable circumstances as opposed to bad ones. So to be a Christian is to have a personally interested passion for our own eternal blessedness. And of course we know that Kierkegaard, as a Christian, is talking



Infinite Passion, cont.

about the hope of eternal life as promised in the Christian gospel.

So this is what it means to be a Christian, according to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: In the inner person, one chooses to set one's heart, to focus one's desires, unreservedly and without end, on the blessings to be found in the eternal life promised in the gospel.

Which brings me to the second passage we read together. This is from Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. Augustine, I believe, is making the same sort of point that Kierkegaard is. The eternal things, those things that will provide for our eternal happiness, deserve our unending passion and love. The world is full of many kinds of things, and each can be appreciated in its own way. But our loves should be ordinate. That is, there should be an order to our loves. We should love with the strongest passion those things that are most worthy of our love. We are on a journey toward eternal blessing, and we would be fools to invest ourselves in things that cannot last and cannot ultimately satisfy. Augustine makes a very striking statement about this journey toward blessedness, and this is the passage I want to quote. (I have paraphrased a bit for the sake of clarity.) Augustine says that if we invest all our love in things that cannot truly satisfy,

...our course will be impeded and sometimes deflected, so that we are retarded in obtaining those things which [provide eternal happiness], or even prevented altogether, shackled by an inferior love.

It is that last phrase that has always spoken to me. Augustine warns that we can be "shackled by an inferior love." We can invest our unending passion in something that cannot provide eternal happiness. This inferior love becomes a shackle that holds us back from completing the journey toward life. The most tragic thing we could do would be to invest the fundamental, undying passion of our lives in something that cannot satisfy.

So what is my point in quoting Kierkegaard and Augustine in this way? Am I urging you to withdraw from the world? Am I saying that nothing in this world is worthy of your ultimate passion, so chuck it all and retreat? It would certainly be an unfortunate sort of

graduation speech if that were my message. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that your last four years of education have been wasted. Forget everything you have learned and go sit on a mountaintop waiting for the end." And Kierkegaard would be furious with me if he thought I was using his words to sell you on such a message. His message was very different. We as Christians do *not* live under the aspect of eternity. We are finite, existing, changing, striving human beings. It is in the midst of *this* life that we make the decisions that will determine our eternal happiness.

I hope that it is clear to you that the last four years have not been preparing you to withdraw from the world. So at the risk of sounding like I am wandering off-topic, let me elaborate on that point for a bit. What have our goals been for these last four years at Gutenberg? And what do they have to do with the infinite passion of your life?

In one sense, our goals have very much focused on life in this world. Our hope has been that we have given you some tools to help you on your journey through this life—tools to help you learn, tools to help you function in the world, tools to help you understand and navigate the circumstances of your life.

A primary goal has been to help you develop important skills. Chief among those, of course, is the skill of reading well. You all know that Gutenberg College was born out of a desire to prepare students to read difficult literature, so that they could, if they choose, go on to read the Bible well. It is very much our hope that you will go on to pursue a personal interest in learning from the Bible. But of course the skill of reading well has other implications; it is not just an academic pursuit. Reading is a tool of learning, and learning is one of the chief goods of this life. To be able to read with understanding means that you can learn from other people, both alive and dead. And from the practical perspective of day-to-day life, people who can read well have a skill that is valuable to themselves and to others.

A related skill is that of being able to read other languages than your own. You learned Greek, of course, because that is the language of the New Testament. But learning other languages has the further potential to truly broaden your understanding. It gives you exposure to ways of thinking in other cultures

and times than your own. And even though I suspect you don't believe me, I maintain that wrestling with grammar is going to pay off for you in the end.

Another important skill we have tried to foster is the skill of discussion. We have wanted to give you a lot of experience expressing your own ideas and listening carefully to the ideas of others. There is a moral dimension to this skill. Listening to other people with respect is a powerful act of love. And the skill of discussing with others has a practical benefit as well. A person who can patiently communicate with another person is a valuable person to have around.

Besides helping you to develop skills, we have also hoped to impart some knowledge to you. By reading primary source texts, you have had the opportunity to see the development of the ideas that shape your culture. Now, a minor benefit of this is that you are developing some cultural literacy. This can be very helpful background information to have. When you read or talk to people who refer to the great thinkers and ideas of your culture, you will have some idea of what they are talking about. That classic of world cinema, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, will make sense to you as never before.

But more importantly than that, we hope that this knowledge will give you perspective on your world. Philosophy, theology, science, and mathematics are not just abstract academic exercises. The ideas that have emerged from those disciplines have made their way into every part of your everyday life. These ideas seep out through the songs you listen to, the video games you play, the conversations you have with old friends late into the evening. Some of these ideas are very good. And some of them are very bad.

As you are well aware, Western philosophy has thought a lot about epistemology, and so have we. That is, how do we know what we know? Should we be skeptical about the possibility of knowing anything at all? Our culture has been teaching us about epistemology from the day we were born. Our culture teaches us to be skeptical that we can know the truth. And at the same time our culture urges us to be self-centered, to celebrate our own personal version of the truth. In a way, much of what we do at Gutenberg is intended to fight this trend. The skills of reading and

discussion, the knowledge of philosophy, science, math—all these things speak to the issue of personal knowledge. And our hope is that we have convinced you that a balance is possible. That is, on the one hand, it is possible to know truth. And on the other hand, we need to humbly acknowledge that we have a lot to learn. We *can* make progress in understanding what an author means. We *can* make progress in understanding what the Bible means. We *can* make progress in understanding what is good and valuable and worth pursuing. We cannot be certain, but we can have knowledge that is good enough to act on. Ok, there was my effort to capture something of what our goals are for your Gutenberg education.

But the truth is that an education can only give you so much. Which brings us back to the subject of passion. Your life is going to be determined not by what you know but by what you have an infinite passion for. There is something that you want that you will never give up on. That thing, that passion, will tell the story of your life. Because if Christianity is true, and I believe that it is, then here is the deal: You always get what you want. Those whose unending passion is for eternal happiness will get eternal happiness. Those whose unending passion is for something other than eternal happiness will get that instead.

We have tried to give you tools that will help you make your way through life. They may help you understand the world better. They may help you discover the truths of the Bible. They may help you find a growing appreciation for the arts. They may help you demonstrate to an employer that you are the right person for the job. They may help you interact with other people in a way that benefits both you and them. But in the end, these skills are only part of the toolkit you will use to discover what your infinite passion is. We don't want you to worship your Gutenberg education, or anything else in this world. That would leave you shackled to an inferior love. In *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard tells us, "Christianity places infinite emphasis upon entering into life, upon eternal happiness as the absolute good." My prayer for you is that your enduring passion will be to enter into that life.

Thank you for inviting me to speak, and congratulations on a job well done. Ω



Summer Institute 2015 REUNION: Tanakh and the Gospel of Matthew August 3-7 • 9AM to 4PM

Christian culture tends to look at the New Testament in isolation, but it was written in a time and culture saturated with the thought forms forged in the Old Testament writings (*Tanakh*). REUNION is intended to reunite Matthew with its Old Testament roots. Join Gutenberg tutors and **Rabbi Dr. Carl Kinbar** at Gutenberg College to explore how Matthew, an Apostle and a Jew, used passages from the *Tanakh* to convey the truth about the Messiah Jesus.

Each morning, short lectures will provide background on passages from the *Tanakh* and the passages in which Matthew uses them. Participants will then discuss each passage in small-group workshops led by the speakers below and other Gutenberg tutors. Each afternoon, two lectures ("reunions") and a question-and-answer session will help clarify Matthew's use of the *Tanakh*.

"Reunion" & Background Speakers



Rabbi Dr. Carl Kinbar, the director of the New School for Jewish Studies, a teacher at the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute, and a member of the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council. He has three decades of teaching experience in congregational, conference, seminar, and online settings.



Earle Craig, a Bible teacher in Southern California and a member of Gutenberg's board of governors.



Gutenberg tutors **Dr. David Crabtree**, **Dr. Jack Crabtree**, **Dr. Charley Dewberry**, and **Ron Julian**. Dr. David Crabtree, Dr. Jack Crabtree, and Ron Julian are co-authors of *The Language of God: A Commonsense Approach to Understanding and Applying the Bible*.

Where: Gutenberg College, 1883 University Street, Eugene, OR

Cost: \$70 per person (includes lunch and morning and afternoon snacks)

Housing: Inquire at the Gutenberg office.

Registration: Call the Gutenberg office, 541-683-5141, or email office@gutenberg.edu. Institute limited to 50 participants.

Schedule & Information: www.gutenberg.edu



Please be praying...

1) It looks like Gutenberg will probably have eight new students this fall. Hooray! And at first glance, they seem to be students who will be receptive to and appreciative of the Gutenberg mission. That's exciting. But a few more students for this fall would be great. Please pray for more to apply.

2) Things are shaping up for a great Summer Institute, during which we will be grappling, along with invited Messianic friends, with how the writers of the New(er) Testament viewed and used the Jewish Scriptures (*Tanakh*) in their thought and writings. It should be very interesting. Please pray for

a good turnout and for great dialogue on the subject.

3) Gutenberg president David Crabtree will be attending two large conferences this summer with different organizations within the Messianic Jewish community. Gutenberg will have a table at each, and we hope to be able to connect with prospective students and their parents. Please pray that lots of new people will become familiar with Gutenberg.

4) We will be working on next year's budget over the summer, and right now it looks like Gutenberg will need to do some more belt tightening. Please pray for clarity about how to utilize the incredible resources (of all sorts) that God has entrusted to us.

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Gutenberg Grads & Faculty

Gutenberg congratulates its 2015 graduates: (front, from left) Toby Swanson, Larissa Weisse, Thomas Clauson, and Katherine Caballero. To graduate, students must write a senior thesis comparing two authors on a topic of their choice. Here are the titles of this year's theses:

Katherine Caballero: "The Three Immortalities" (Homer/Dante).

Thomas Clauson: "A Comparative Dialectical Polemic..." (Wittgenstein/Polanyi).

Toby Swanson: "That Single Individual" (Søren Kierkegaard/Jacques Ellul).

Larissa Weisse: "Mythical Truths" (J.R.R. Tolkien/C.S. Lewis).