

For several decades, the American radio personality Garrison Keillor was an entertainer enjoyed by millions. He is most well-known for creating and hosting a show on public radio titled “A Prairie Home Companion.” And part of Keillor’s regular routine on the airwaves was to talk about life in his fictitious hometown of Lake Wobegon, positioned in his narrative as a small Midwestern town. And, in that regard, the quote that Keillor is likely most famous for is this: “That’s the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” That’s right, *where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average!*

That phrase has always captured so much richness, seemingly every time it’s put forth—and that’s surely why Garrison Keillor used it all the time! So...just what *does* that quote capture? Well, it projects a good attitude about fellow citizens. And it seems to encompass real gratitude toward those fellow citizens. And it helps position a mentality that people are made in the image of God. But the ironic phrasing of Keillor’s quote is an example of what’s called a halo effect, leading us to understand that these people are considered “strong, good-looking and above average” *simply because they live in his own hometown!*

Well, you know that we all tend to put a bit of a halo above certain people we’ve chosen to hang out with. Keillor knew that and, as all comedians do, he shredded the notion that his saying was really true every time he said it. That’s because, almost by definition, the *average* town has *average* people in it! But it also has below-average folks and truly above-average people...maybe even some that are way above average!

What we’re describing here can be illuminated by noting what math geeks call a bell curve, yes, a curve that looks like a side-view of a bell, you know, a bell you can ring. A classic bell curve has what’s called a “normal distribution.” And the midpoint of a perfect bell curve at 50% with half the observations to the left of the midpoint and half to the right, well, that’s just what a non-mathematician would call *average*. And all that is good enough for us today...because Keillor called all the children in Lake Wobegon above-average. And everyone hearing him then, and to me now, gets the gist and also gets the joke, the irony!

Here’s the thing. By whatever relevant measure decided upon for a project or endeavor at hand, it’s reasonable to observe that some participants are average, others *below* average, and still others *above* average. And Christians are no different in that regard, because we are not programmed robots.

So, as a more accurate, rather blunt take on Keillor’s observation, I sometimes tell young Christians this: *the average Christian is...average*. Yep, it’s kind of ironclad: the general truth of the math is just that, even in God’s world: *the average Christian is...average!* That tends to get the attention of young believers. But.

But *this*: having taught many college students for years and observed many going on to live very fruitful lives, I have come to believe every person—yes, especially every believer—has gifting that God will help develop. But here’s the thing: *the development of a believer is first and foremost up to that believer.*

But there are always real differences in opinion as to what’s worthy to pursue—yes, just what is the target to pursue in Christians’ development—and *then to measure*. So that crystallizes the essential question for serious believers: what tools to develop in our toolkit? *Yes, just what do we target to be measured on?*

Look, right off the bat, when we observe Christians and their churches over a very long time—and we very much should observe just that—well, we quickly find them in all different types of pursuits. But sadly, for large groups of Christians, some of their key pursuits don’t really truly align with God’s key, revealed purposes from the New Testament. Let’s take a look at observably common examples that veer off-target.

Christians pursuing the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law. Well, the truth is, that very fulfillment has already been done for every believer in Christ...*done fully, perfectly, comprehensively, completely by Jesus Himself!* In fact, we are “not under the law but under grace” (Romans 6 ESV). In fact, the strength of sin is the law (1 Corinthians 15:56). And, even worse, when all who pursue fulfilling the law as their goal, each will fail...and when they fail in one point of the law, they have become guilty of all of it (James 2:10). But what’s so amazing is, again, that Christ fulfilled the Law *for us*...so the pressure’s off! But how many churches and

congregants obstinately pursue their keeping of the Mosaic law *as paramount*...again, that already fulfilled by Christ on their behalf? Wow, talk about diminishing Jesus' finished work on the Cross on our behalf!

Christians mistakenly pursuing works unto their salvation. Tragically, many who claim Christianity have been taught and have it purposefully modeled to them that their salvation is somehow dependent upon their works. But Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Some consider this wrong works-salvation pursuit as a subset of wrongly pursuing fulfillment of the Law unto salvation.

Christians pursuing social change or betterment without any hint of or care about the clear acting upon God's commandment that all believers proclaim the eternal gospel and make disciples of Christ. Yes, *social action has been a key focus for many* in America many decades. But here's the challenge: whether the desire and the results for social change are cultural or political...liberal or conservative, just what is the *Biblical, eternally meaningful end result for each recipient of social action*? Matthew 16:26 is noteworthy for recipients and beneficiaries of social betterment, too: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" So, Christians: why ignore eternity and only work for temporal impact?

So, you might be saying: when it comes to living a believer's life well, *just who do you think is measuring it all rightly*? Well, it's actually simple and straightforward. Here's how the Apostle Paul told the Israelites about King David in Acts 13:22: "And when [God] had removed [King Saul], he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.'" That's for us in the New Covenant, too: *be people after God's heart...and do all God's will!*

*Just so.* God's daily will for us is made clear by Jesus's commandments and New Testament instruction. First, Jesus's handling of the two greatest commandments: He was asked, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, 'The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'" (Mark 12:28-31)

Later, the Apostle John wrote this (1 John 5:3), "This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome." Contrary to condemning others, it is not burdensome to love every sinner in the neighborhood, every sinner in the workplace. Jesus first loved each one of them and desires all to be saved. 1 Timothy 2:4 says exactly that: "...God our Savior desires all people to be saved." And that directly follows the authority of Jesus in instructing us to go forth and make disciples around the world.

So. God's Scripture-revealed will is clear as a bell! His desired action for us is to love people every day, all the way unto witness of the gospel of the Kingdom to which they've opportunity to choose to respond. Hey, we must ask ourselves: are these verses *mere suggestions* from God? Or are these privileged alignments with God for His sons and daughters who've entered the Kingdom themselves (Colossians 1:13), each appointed an ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20)! So then, we must ask...

Is the average Christian in America acting on the privilege of loving God with all their heart, with that love for God manifested in loving their neighbors all the way to their discipling? Or is the average Christian in America choosing to "opt out" of these commandments, these instructions so plainly spelled out in the Bible? What does your personal observation yield—is the typical Christian in America lukewarm (or worse) in obeying these commands? Or are we just inclined to conclude that we are all simply "above average."

Jesus did weigh in on this, you know, saying: "The field are white unto harvest, but the laborers are few." (Matthew 9:37) Hey, the Bible is clear—*our privilege is to obey the Great Commission!* But are we fulfilling Keillor's quote instead, blithely believing that our church and our obedience are "above average?" Now there's no condemnation here—just opportunity ahead: you know, being one of the few laborers, in way-above-average obedience to God's desire for people in eternity! *We are free to obey and reap!* Stunning.

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Do you believe that God will ultimately measure churches and people for their obedience to His New Testament commandments? Why or why not? Use Scriptures like 1 Corinthians 3:9-16 and Revelation 1-3 as a springboard for discussion.
  
2. By the light of New Testament Scriptures, is your church “average” or “better than average?” Discuss.
  
3. By the light of New Testament Scriptures, are you an average or “better than average” believer? Or do you think God does not and will not measure your level of obedience as a believer at all, even regarding New Testament Scriptures like “love your neighbor” and the Great Commission? Discuss.