

Playing by the Rules, Part 1 of 2

Somewhere an old classroom bell rang. In buildings without bells the notes in the air quivered nonetheless, as countless cell phone timers began to vibrate. Doors opened and closed as offices disgorged their occupants. At the other end of campus, the university carillon was tolling out the twelve tones of noon. Someone in the hall was cheerfully whistling the children's song *I Think I'll Go Eat Worms*.

The whistling grew louder, then stopped. Mark poked his head through my door.

"Professor Theophilus? You hungry? Let me take you to lunch. My treat."

"*Your* treat? Where? The bait shop?"

He grinned goofily. "Wherever you like. I'm celebrating."

"The Union, then. What are we celebrating?"

"I've been accepted into all three grad schools I applied to."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks," he said, accepting my hand self-consciously. "If you don't mind, though, let's shake a leg. I want to have time to talk. I'll tell you what about when we get there."

By the time we emerged from the building, the carillon had finished its toll of hours and launched into a tune. Mark hadn't heard it before and asked if I knew what it was. I squinted up at the 15-story combination bell tower, wastewater treatment plant and parking garage that students call the Temple.

"Led Zeppelin," I answered. "Before your time."

"I'm not very up on the classics," he admitted.

At the Union, we ordered at the Italian fast-food place and took our food outside, shooing away the ever-hungry birds.

"Now, then," I said. "What did you want to talk about? Embarrassment of riches? Are you trying to decide which of your three grad school offers to accept?"

"No, I think I've got that pretty well figured out. This is unrelated." He hesitated. "Do you remember that time I talked with you about Molly?"

I nodded. "You thought the two of you were just good friends. She wanted to talk about commitment. That time?"

"Right. *She* said we'd been dating for two years. *I* said we hadn't been dating at all.

"You just spent lots of time together," I said. "Exclusively."

"That's what you pointed out." He grinned even more goofily than before. "To make a long story short, I found out she was right."

I raised an eyebrow.

"It took me a while, but it finally hit me that she wasn't -- just a friend -- after all." He paused. "We've been talking about marriage."

"Mark! Do I owe you congratulations twice in the same day?"

"Not yet. We're *all but*, but we're not actually engaged. In the meantime I'm trying to sort through my emotions. Feelings I didn't even know that I had. Romantic. Bewildered. Something like obsessed."

I smiled.

"I don't want to give you the wrong idea about what I'm obsessing over. We're not, um, physical."

"I understand. Being in love and being in lust are different things."

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "But I'd be dishonest if I didn't admit that I think about the other thing too."

"Naturally."

"And that complicates things," he said.

"I should think it would."

"Even simple things. Like, before it was no big deal being alone with Molly. No more than being alone with one of my guy friends, say Don or Zack. Now it takes on this huge significance. Like enormous, invisible forces and meanings are in play. The light in the room seems to change. She even *looks* different. Like she's --"

He stopped and looked away. "That's how we figured out that it would be smarter *not* to spend much time alone. So we don't. But the whole thing's got me thinking."

"About what?"

"Well, I know we should be abstinent and all that."

"Uh huh."

"But what *else* can't we do? Or maybe I should ask, what *can* we do?"

"Do you mean physically?"

"What else would I mean? I don't want to be caught off guard again. Which things are -- over the line?"

"What sort of 'things'?"

"Do I have to give you a list?" Eyes cast down, he rapidly gave me six or seven examples. "What about ...? What about ...? What about ...?"

I held up my hand. "Enough."

"Good," he answered. "It's embarrassing."

Our pizzas were getting cold. For a few minutes we attacked our meals. I broke the silence first.

"Mark, it sounds as though you want me to give you *rules*."

"Sure. Rules, guidelines, limits, whatever you want to call them. Are you saying there aren't any? That I'm being legalistic?"

"No, there are. And it's not legalistic to recognize the legalities. But I wonder if you're starting at the wrong end of the problem."

"C'mon, Professor T, don't play word games. I'm at wherever I'm at. I don't know what end it is. Whatever that means."

I laughed. "All right, we'll do it your way. You said that you wanted to be 'abstinent and all that,' right?"

"Until marriage."

"Then let's ask what puts abstinence at risk."

"Um. Sure."

"You and Molly have already recognized the danger implicit in spending much time alone. How was it that you described the experience?"

Mark turned slightly pink and smiled. "I said that it seemed as though all of a sudden, enormous, invisible forces and meanings were in play."

"So you already see that you should avoid whatever puts them into play."

"I guess so," he replied.

"What else puts them in play?"

He hesitated. "To tell you the truth, Prof, I don't know exactly what I meant about forces and meanings. I've never been in love before. I'm saying things I don't really understand."

"OK, forget the 'meanings' part for now. Just tell me what puts the 'forces' in play."

"You're still losing me."

"Then I'll make it simpler still. Once the motor is running, the car could slip into gear at any time. So what gets your motor running? Do you follow me?"

"I follow, all right." His hue deepened. "Just kissing her gets my motor running."

"Then obviously, you shouldn't be kissing her."

"What? I can't even kiss her goodnight?"

"A modest goodnight kiss is self-limiting. After all, you're leaving. What I had in mind were smooching *sessions*. That's like turning on the motor, putting it into in gear, stepping on the gas, and expecting the car not to go anywhere."

"I'm not so happy about your conclusions, Prof --"

"I can see that."

-- but I see the force of your argument."

"Do you?"

"Yes. You're saying that practically speaking, abstinence requires more than abstaining from sexual intercourse."

"Right. Necking sessions -- do people still say 'necking'? -- aren't recreation. You can't expect to remain abstinent if you indulge in what amounts to foreplay."

"I get it."

"It's not hard to. Now you're a smart guy, Mark. Don't you see that the same consideration answers most of your other questions about limits?"

"I think so. Molly and I need to avoid not only literal sexual intercourse, but also -- well --"

"Go on."

"Whatever resembles it, whatever tempts us to it, and whatever gets our motors running for it."

"Right."

"Seems like common sense."

"That's because it is."

Mark played with his pizza crusts and sighed deeply.

"You're making a hissing sound," I said. "Are you not convinced after all?"

"No, I'm convinced," he said ruefully. "It's just that I might have liked what I'm convinced about better if it had, let's say, more elasticity."

I smiled. "I told you that you were starting at the wrong end of the problem."

"You did say that. I guess you'd better tell me the right end after all."

"Mark, you began by asking about the rules. No wonder you're sighing."

"So where should I have begun?"

"With the precious and costly ideal for the sake of which the rules exist."

"Isn't that just what we did?"

"Did we? What are you calling the ideal?"

"Abstinence. We started with the ideal of abstinence, then we worked out the rules that protect it."

"Abstinence isn't the *ideal*, Mark, it's just the prime *rule*. We worked out some other rules that serve as its bodyguards, but I'm asking you a different question. Tell me what abstinence is *for*."

"I can't."

"Sure you can."

"No, I can't."

"Mark, I can't believe this. You're an experienced Christian. I've known you for years. I thought I understood your mind pretty well."

"Yeah."

"Are you telling me now that you don't know the great and beautiful thing for the sake of which we have all these complex and difficult rules?"

He gazed back steadily. "Professor Theophilus," he said, "I've known you just as long as you've known me, and that's exactly what I'm telling you. This great and beautiful thing you're talking about. Explain to me what it is."

Copyright © 2008 J. Budziszewski. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. This article originally appeared in *TrueU.org*.