

Two Borrowed Books

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I once loaned a book to a young man who was preparing to preach his first sermon. I was glad to make the book available as I hoped the information it contained would help him to grow. He kept the book for quite a while, and then one day I noticed that the book had reappeared on the shelf in my office without mention. But the book was different than the others in the nearly-new set.

Upon closer examination I found that the book had been abused. The cover was dirty and scarred, the spine permanently bent as if someone had thrown the book on the pavement and stepped on it. When I asked the young man about the condition of the book, he denied any knowledge of its mistreatment and said he had returned it in the condition in which it had been borrowed. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, but the book had been hardly used and no one else had borrowed it.

Just recently someone else borrowed a book from my library. It, too, quietly reappeared in my office, and upon reshelving it I noticed that it was different. It seemed to have the smell and stiffness of a new book. This was puzzling. Why would anyone replace my old book with a new one?

The answer came when I next saw the borrower. He explained that the pages had become a bit worn during the course of reading, and he did not feel comfortable returning the book in that condition. As he had wanted a copy of the book for himself, he gave me the new volume he had purchased and kept the borrowed volume.

Moral of the story: Who showed greater respect for the owner of the book, the first borrower or the second?

Our lives amount to a borrowed existence. Some say, "It's my life. I'll do with it what I want!" But this is not true. Our spirits are given by God and dwell in loaned bodies. We live "on borrowed time." Our actions affect for good or bad our spirits made in God's image. And while we do have some independence, we will be called to account for the condition of the soul which we return to God (Ecc 3:21; 12:7; 2 Cor 5:10).

The care we take of our souls will reflect our attitude toward God. We will not be able to sneak our souls back into heaven hoping that God won't notice that His image has been marred. Respect for God elicits the very thing I wanted from the young man who defaced my book: admission of responsibility and regret for mismanaging someone else's property.