



Volume 3, Issue 8

# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*

*“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”*



August 2016

*Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America*

## *Religious Liberty and the Right to be Christian*

Moral revolutions require legal revolutions. This is certainly the case with the sexual revolution and its various causes of sexual liberation. A revolution is only complete when the legal structure aligns itself with a new moral understanding. This alignment is exactly what is taking place in American public life on the issue of gay liberation.

Every society has a structure of systems that either influence or coerce behavior. Eventually, societies move to legislate and regulate behavior in order to align the society with what is commonly, or at least largely, considered morally right and wrong. Civilization could not survive without a system of moral controls and influences.

Throughout almost all of Western history, for the most part, this process has played out in a non-threatening way for the Christian church and Christians in the larger society. So long as the moral judgment of the culture matched the convictions and teachings of the church, the church and culture were not at odds in the courts. Furthermore, under these conditions, to be found on the wrong side of a moral assessment was rarely a likelihood for Christians.

All that began to change in the modern age as the culture became more secularized and as Western societies moved more progressively distant from the Christian morality they had embraced in the past. Christians in this generation recognize that we do not represent the same moral framework now pervasively presented in modern academia, the context of creative culture, and the arena of law. The secularization of public life and the separation of society from its Christian roots has left many Americans seemingly unaware of the fact that the very beliefs and teachings for which Christians are now criticized were once considered not only mainstream beliefs, but essential to the entire project of society. As the sexual revolution completely pervades the society, and as the issues raised by the efforts of gay liberation and the legalization of same-sex marriage come to the fore, Christians now face an array of religious liberty challenges that were inconceivable in previous generations.

In one of the most important of these recent cases, a judge found that a wedding photographer broke the law by refusing to serve as a photographer for a same-sex wedding. In an incredibly revealing decision, the court stated, quite straightforwardly, that the religious liberties of the photographer would indeed be violated by coerced participation in a same-sex wedding. Nevertheless, the court found that the new morality trumped concern for religious liberty.

Similarly, we have seen religious institutions, especially colleges and schools, confronted by the demands that amount to a surrender to the sexual revolution with regards to nondiscrimination on the basis of sex, sexual behavior, and sexual orientation pertaining to admissions, the hiring of faculty, and student housing. In some jurisdictions, lawmakers are contemplating hate crime legislation that would marginalize and criminalize speech that is in conflict with the new moral consensus.



# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



### *Religious Liberty and the Right to be Christian - Continued*

We now face an inevitable conflict of liberties. In this context of acute and radical moral change, the conflict of liberties is excruciating, immense, and eminent. In this case, the conflict of liberties means that the new moral regime, with the backing of the courts and the regulatory state, will prioritize erotic liberty over religious liberty. Over the course of the last several decades, we have seen this revolution coming. Erotic liberty has been elevated as a right more fundamental than religious liberty. Erotic liberty now marginalizes, subverts, and neutralizes religious liberty—a liberty highly prized by the builders of this nation and its constitutional order. We must remember that the framers of the Constitution did not believe they were creating rights within the Constitution, but rather acknowledging rights given to all humanity by “nature and nature’s God.”

The challenges we will face with regards to religious liberty are immense and increasing by the season. The government has at its disposal mechanisms for moral coercion that reach far beyond prisons, jails, and fines. For example, at least some business people who refused to participate in same-sex weddings, such as photographers, bakers, or florists, were required to undergo “sensitivity training.” In order to understand how the new moral regime uses sensitivity training, it is helpful to think back to iconic works of the twentieth century such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984*. These sensitivity training programs represent efforts to bring intellectual cleansing. And now, in some jurisdictions they can be inflicted upon religious believers who dare oppose the morality of the new regime.

The religious liberty challenge we now face consigns every believer, every religious institution, and every congregation in the arena of conflict where erotic liberty and religious liberty now clash. This poses no danger to theological liberals and their churches and denominations because those churches have accommodated themselves to the new morality and find themselves quite comfortable within the context of the new moral regime. Furthermore, some of these liberal denominations and churches style themselves as defenders of the new morality and actually advocate legal modifications that restrict the religious liberty rights of more conservative churches and denominations.

Interestingly, Jonathan Rauch, one of the early advocates of gay marriage warned his fellow moral revolutionaries that they must be careful lest they trample upon the conscience rights and religious liberty of their adversaries. In his book, *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought*, Rauch voiced his concern:

*Today, I fear that many people on my side of the gay-equality question are forgetting our debt to the system that freed us. Some gay people—not all, not even most, but quite a few—want to expunge discriminatory views. “Discrimination is discrimination and bigotry is bigotry,” they say, “and they are intolerable whether or not they happen to be someone’s religion or moral creed.”*

Rauch also stated, “I hope that when gay people—and non-gay people—encounter hateful or discriminatory opinions, we respond not by trying to silence or punish them but by trying to correct them.” Very few signs, however, are signaling that Rauch’s admonition is being heard. A review of the religious liberty challenges already confronting the conscience, conduct, and belief rights of convictional Christians shows us how daunting all this really is. We can be sure this is not the end of our struggle. It is only the beginning. ~ **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.**



# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



### *Can an Unchanging God be Compassionate?*

The God of Scripture is the one true constant in all the universe: “I, the Lord, do not change” (Malachi 3:6). His nature and His thoughts are as immutable as His eternal plans. Specifically, He does not alter His Word, revise His will, revoke His promises, or change His mind: “God is not man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” (Numbers 23:19).

The necessary implication of God’s immutability is that He is not subject to shifting moods, flashes of temper, fluctuating dispositions, or seasons of despondency. In theological terms, God is impassible. That means He cannot be moved by involuntary emotions, suffering, pain, or injury. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith (2.1), God is “infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions.”

Divine impassibility is not an easy concept to grasp. Robert Ingersoll, the famous nineteenth-century skeptic, wrote, “Think of that!—without body, parts, or passions. I defy any man in the world to write a better description of nothing. You cannot conceive of a finer word-painting of a vacuum than ‘without body, parts, or passions.’” Nowadays even some Christian theologians shun the idea of divine impassibility because they think it makes God seem cold and aloof.

But that’s a false notion. To say that God is not vulnerable, that He Himself cannot be hurt, and that He isn’t given to moodiness is not to say He is utterly unfeeling or devoid of affections. On the contrary, Scripture says “God is love” (1 John 4:8). His compassion, His lovingkindness, and His tender mercies endure forever (Psalm 136). His divine affections are more real, more sure, and more trustworthy than any human emotions could ever be. In fact, the constancy and infinity of God’s tender affections epitomize why divine impassibility is such a wonderful truth. “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is [His] faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

The main problem in our thinking about these things is that we tend to reduce God’s attributes to human terms, and we shouldn’t. We’re not to imagine that God is like us (Psalm 50:21). His affections, unlike human emotions, are not involuntary reflexes, spasms of temper, paroxysms of good and bad humor, or conflicted states of mind. He is as deliberate and as faithful in His lovingkindness as He is perfect and incorruptible in His holiness.

The unchangeableness of God’s affections is—or should be—a steady comfort to true believers. His love for us is infinite and unshakable. “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him” (Psalm 103:11). And His constant mercy is a secure and dependable anchor—both when we sin and when we suffer unjustly.



# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



### *Can an Unchanging God be Compassionate? - Continued*

“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Psalm 103:13). Far from portraying God as unsympathetic and untouched by our suffering, Scripture stresses His deep and devoted compassion virtually every time it mentions the unchangeableness of God.

Notice that I have quoted almost entirely from Old Testament texts to establish the connection between God’s compassion and His immutability. The commonly-held notion that the Hebrew Scriptures portray God as a stern judge whose verdicts are always unrelentingly severe is an unwarranted caricature. The tender mercies of God are a persistent theme throughout the Old Testament. From beginning to end the entire Bible presents God as “gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness . . . good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Psalm 145:8-9).

In fact, God’s lovingkindness is often given particular stress in the very places where His fiery wrath against sin is mentioned. (See, for example, Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 77:7-10; Isaiah 54:8; 60:10; Habakkuk 3:2). Even the prophets’ most severe threats and harshest words of condemnation are tempered with reminders of God’s inexhaustible kindness and sympathetic mercy (Jeremiah 33:5-11; Hosea 14:4-9).

Of course, there’s a careful balance that must be maintained here. It is neither wise nor helpful to pit the divine attributes against one another as if they were contradictory (they are not)—or to act as if God’s merciful attributes automatically overruled the gravity of divine justice (they do not). “Behold then the kindness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22). All God’s attributes are equally—and infinitely—exalted in Scripture.

It is a serious mistake to imagine that God’s wrath conflicts with His mercy. It is a particularly egregious error to pit God’s holiness against His tenderness or to think God’s lovingkindness toward sinners simply cancels out His wrath against sin. Don’t dream for a moment that divine mercy eliminates the threat of God’s judgment. God would be unjust if He did not punish evildoers (Exodus 34:7; Nahum 1:3). On the contrary, God’s wrath magnifies His mercy—revealing the severity of punishment that we have been spared from.

There is no conflict or contradiction among God’s attributes. God’s unchanging nature doesn’t make Him incapable of responding to us with compassion. Rather, His impassibility reassures us that His compassion never changes. ~ *Dr. John MacArthur*

### *Three Types of Legalism*

Have you, as a Christian, ever been accused of legalism? That word is often bandied about in the Christian subculture incorrectly. For example, some people might call John a legalist because they view him as narrow-minded. But the term legalism does not refer to narrow-mindedness. In reality, legalism manifests itself in many subtle ways.



# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



### *Three Types of Legalism - Continued*

Basically, *legalism* involves abstracting the law of God from its original context. Some people seem to be preoccupied in the Christian life with obeying rules and regulations, and they conceive of Christianity as being a series of do's and don'ts, cold and deadly set of moral principles. That's *one* form of legalism, where one is concerned merely with the keeping of God's law as an end in itself.

Now, God certainly cares about our following His commandments. Yet there is more to the story that we dare not forget. God gave laws such as the Ten Commandments in the context of the covenant. *First*, God was gracious. He redeemed His people out of slavery in Egypt and entered into a loving, filial relationship with Israel. Only after that grace-based relationship was established did God begin to define the specific laws that are pleasing to Him. I had a professor in graduate school who said, "The essence of Christian theology is grace, and the essence of Christian ethics is gratitude." The legalist isolates the law from the God who gave the law. He is not so much seeking to obey God or honor Christ as he is to obey rules that are devoid of any personal relationship.

There's no love, joy, life, or passion. It's a rote, mechanical form of law-keeping that we call externalism. The legalist focuses only on obeying bare rules, destroying the broader context of God's love and redemption in which He gave His law in the first place.

To understand the second type of legalism, we must remember that the New Testament distinguishes between the letter of the law (its outward form) and the spirit of the law. The *second* form of legalism divorces the letter of the law from the spirit of the law. It obeys the letter but violates the spirit. There's only a subtle distinction between this form of legalism and the one previously mentioned.

How does one keep the letter of the law but violate its spirit? Suppose a man likes to drive his car at the minimum required speed irrespective of the conditions under which he is driving. If he is on an interstate and the minimum posted speed is forty miles per hour, he drives forty miles per hour and no less. He does this even during torrential downpours, when driving at this minimum required speed actually puts other people in danger because they have had the good sense to slow down and drive twenty miles an hour so as not to skid off the road or hydroplane. The man who insists on a speed of forty miles per hour even under these conditions is driving his car to please himself alone. Although he appears to the external observer as one who is scrupulous in his civic obedience, his obedience is only external, and he doesn't care at all about what the law is actually all about. This second kind of legalism obeys the externals while the heart is far removed from any desire to honor God, the intent of His law, or His Christ.

This *second* type of legalism can be illustrated by the Pharisees who confronted Jesus over healing on the Sabbath day ([Matthew 12:9-14](#)). They were concerned only with the letter of the law and avoiding anything that might look like work to them. These teachers missed the spirit of the law, which was directed against ordinary labor that is not required to maintain life and not against efforts to heal the sick.

The *third* type of legalism adds our own rules to God's law and treats them as divine. It is the most common and deadly form of legalism. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees at this very point, saying, "You teach human traditions as if they were the word of God." We have no right to heap up restrictions on people where He has no stated restriction.



# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



### *Three Types of Legalism - Continued*

Each church has a right to set its own policies in certain areas. For example, the Bible says nothing about soft drinks in the church's fellowship hall, but a church has every right to regulate such things. But when we use these human policies to bind the conscience in an ultimate way and make such policies determinative of one's salvation, we venture dangerously into territory that is God's alone.

Many people think that the essence of Christianity is following the right rules, even rules that are extrabiblical. For example, the Bible doesn't say that we can't play cards or have a glass of wine with dinner. We can't make these matters the external test of authentic Christianity. That would be a deadly violation of the gospel because it would substitute human tradition for the real fruits of the Spirit. We come perilously close to blasphemy by misrepresenting Christ in this way. Where God has given liberty, we should never enslave people with man-made rules. We must be careful to fight this form of legalism.

The gospel calls men to repentance, holiness, and godliness. Because of this, the world finds the gospel offensive. But woe to us if we add unnecessarily to that offense by distorting the true nature of Christianity by combining it with legalism. Because Christianity is concerned with morality, righteousness, and ethics, we can easily make that subtle move from a passionate concern for godly morality into legalism if we are not careful.  
~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

### *Attitudes of a True Shepherd*

Every morning for several months, my wife and I walked past an injured Canada goose, whose feathers stuck out in several directions. For all those months, several geese dutifully stayed with the injured bird.

Likewise, caring for the wounded is the church's loving duty to her own. Paul teaches us that when one member of Christ's body suffers, "all the members suffer" (1 [Corinthians 12:26](#) KJV). Caring for the grieving promotes the unity of the body of Christ and fosters the communion of saints. Furthermore, grieving saints have a claim on our compassion for Christ's sake ([Matthew 25:40](#)).

This is particularly true of pastors. We are called to be shepherd or pastor ([Ephesians 4:11](#)), which means we are to "feed (literally, 'be a shepherd to') the church of God" ([Acts 20:28](#) KJV). That involves avoiding certain attitudes and cultivating others, then putting those attitudes into action, remembering our great calling as Christ's under shepherds.

#### **Attitudes to Avoid**

**First**, don't regard grieving people as an interruption. I was in the ministry for more than ten years when I received what proved to be a life-changing call. I was working on the conclusion of my doctoral dissertation when the phone rang. I sighed as I answered: "Am I that much of an interruption?" asked the voice on the other end. "Interruption?" I asked meekly. "Yes, didn't you hear yourself sigh?" Suddenly I realized that my dissertation, not the grieving caller, was the interruption. The grieving caller was my life's work, my calling, my real ministry. My dissertation was the interruption of this real ministry.



# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



### *Attitudes of a True Shepherd - Continued*

I never forgot that lesson over the last eighteen years of ministry. Grieving, hurting people are what ministry is all about. We must not think of our churches and our parishioners in terms of numbers or cases; rather, we should think of our churches as hospitals where the wounded and grieving come to us, seeking our biblical guidance and loving care.

**Second**, don't treat all sheep the same. As a good shepherd, remember that some sheep will need more attention than others. **Third**, don't forsake shepherding for preaching. Don't say, "I'm a preacher first and foremost, so I don't need to spend much time with my flock." Preaching and pastoring are two sides of the coin of ministry. Yes, it's tough to do both well, but do them you must. God never promised you that the ministry would be easy.

#### **Attitudes to Cultivate**

**First**, love your grieving people. People are hurting. If we do not shepherd them in their sorrows, we are hirelings, not shepherds, and should repent of our indifference. Say with Richard Baxter, "I am contented to consume my body, to sacrifice to God's service, and to spend all that I have, and to be spent myself, for the souls of men." **Second**, develop a positive attitude toward pastoral ministry. As a pastor, you need to cultivate an attitude of willing servitude to pastoring the needy. Say with Thomas Scott, "Had I a thousand lives, I would willingly spend them in the pastoral ministry: and had I as many sons, I should gladly devote them to it."

**Third**, shepherd the grieving as you are shepherded by Christ. Be imitators of Christ for Christ's sake (**Ephesians 5:1-2**). If Christ purchased His flock with His own blood, should you not be willing to make some sacrifices to serve His hurting people?

#### **Putting Attitude into Action**

**First**, give yourself to the grieving. Offer hurting people your full attention. Put everything else out of your mind when you are with them. **Second**, focus on the Word. Let Scripture be the center of your visit. Read a brief, fitting portion with emphasis and feeling. Point people to Christ. Never let a visit pass without leaving behind the savor of the world's best and most able Physician.

**Third**, bathe your ministry in prayer. Pray earnestly for the grieving in their presence and in their absence. Pray for healing and for submission. Pray for divine intervention and for sanctification of the grief. Encourage the grieving to pray as well. Teach them that praying and ministering to others who grieve can help alleviate their own grief. **Fourth**, involve the flock. Alert your elders to such cases. Look for other members of the church that may be able to help.

Remember that the grieving and dying are facing many terrors, so offer comfort to the saved, and evangelize the unsaved. What joy we feel as pastors when we see the grieving saved and growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ under our shepherding! (**2 Peter 3:18**).

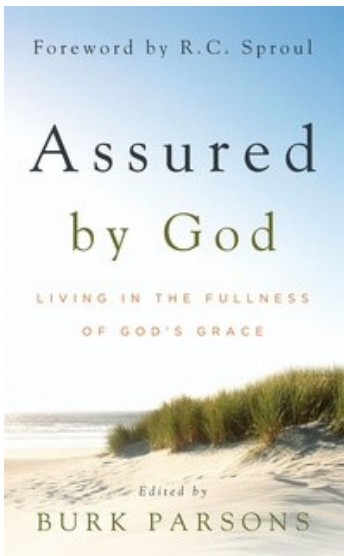
You are an agent of the Spirit, who has called you to your work, enables and equips you for it, and works through you by His Word to comfort the grieving (**1 Peter 1:12**). Such an honor far outweighs all the challenges and trials of church work. ~ **Dr. Joel Beeke**



# *West Suffolk Epistle* *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



## *Book Reviews* *Assured by God* *Burk Parsons*



All Christians have asked themselves the question: “Am I really saved?” This new book, edited by Burk Parsons, editor of *Tabletalk*, cuts through the confusion over the assurance of our salvation and shows how professing believers can be certain they belong to Christ.

Featuring chapters by Dr. Joel Beeke, Dr. Jerry Bridges, Dr. Sinclair Ferguson, Dr. John MacArthur, Dr. Keith Mathison, Dr. Al Mohler, Burk Parsons, Dr. Rick Phillips, and Dr. Philip Ryken this volume addresses the ground of our assurance, the experience of our assurance, the means of our assurance, and many other topics. Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr. provides the foreword and epilogue.

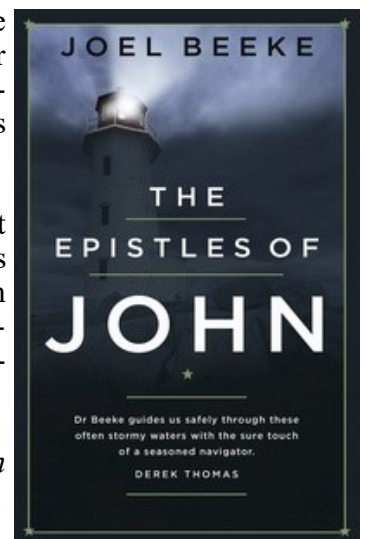
*“I would like every believer to read Assured by God, a helpful collection of essays on the assurance of salvation. It is edited by Burk Parsons, editor of Tabletalk magazine.” ~ Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

## *The Epistles of John* *Dr. Joel Beeke*

The epistles of John, addressed to Christians at the end of the first century, were written to encourage believers in the face of false teachings, to assure them of their new life in Christ, and to steer them to safe harbor. When thousands are compromising the gospel and embracing modern philosophies, these epistles can help us remain faithful to the gospel.

In this rich, practical exposition of the epistles of John, Dr. Joel Beeke brings out the message of John’s letters in their historical context as well as their timeless truths that are as applicable today as when John first wrote them. Travel through the epistles of John and you will come to know the essence of the gospel, the glorious adoption of the children of God, the Christian’s duties in this world, the believer’s path to fullness of joy, and much more.

*“ Dr. Beeke guides us safely through these often stormy waters with the sure touch of a seasoned navigator” ~ Dr. Derek Thomas*







# *West Suffolk Epistle*

## *West Suffolk Baptist Church*



### *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*

#### *The State of Man after Death and the Resurrection of the Dead - Chapter 31*

1. The bodies of men after death return to dust and suffer decay, but their souls which neither die nor sink into a state of unconsciousness—they are inherently immortal—immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, whose holiness is at death perfected, are received into paradise, where they are with Christ, looking upon the face of God in light and glory, and waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. The souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Souls separated from their bodies are in either paradise or hell, for the Scripture speaks of no other abodes of the departed.
2. At the last day, saints then alive on the earth will not die, but be changed. All the dead will be raised up with their selfsame bodies, and none other, although with different qualities, and shall be united again to their souls for ever.
3. By the power of Christ, the bodies of the unrighteous will be raised to dishonor. By His Spirit, Christ will raise the bodies of the righteous to honor, for they will be refashioned after the pattern of His own glorious body.

### *Discipling and Disciplining*

There is a strange dichotomy in the language of the contemporary church. Much is said and written about the important function of discipling new Christians, while at the same time the function of church discipline has almost vanished. Today, discipline is a word used to refer to the instruction and nurture of the believer. It does not usually carry the connotation of ecclesiastical censure or punishment.

In one sense, this modern version of discipling is linked to the New Testament model. The term disciple in the New Testament means “learner.” The disciples of Jesus were students who enrolled in Jesus’ peripatetic rabbinic school. They addressed Him as “Rabbi” or “Teacher.” To follow Jesus involved literally walking around behind Him as He instructed them (the word peripatetic comes from the Greek word peripateo, which means “to walk”).

The New Testament community was forbearing and patient with its members, embracing a love that covered a multitude of sins. But in the New Testament, church discipleship also involved discipline. Part of apostolic nurture was seen in rebuke and admonition. The church had various levels or degrees of such discipline, ranging from the mild rebuke to the ultimate step of excommunication. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



# *West Suffolk Epistle*

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### *Birthday and Anniversary Corner - August 2016*

#### Birthdays

*Jan Sheldon - August 1*  
*Melanie Massie - August 6*  
*Ben Scofield - August 8*  
*Carrie Purser - August 24*  
*Ezra Purser - August 26*  
*Phyllis Carter - August 27*  
*Marlin Halsey - August 27*

#### Anniversaries

*Mike and Cheryl Prince - August 9*

“When we understand the character of God, when we grasp something of His holiness, then we begin to understand the radical character of our sin and hopelessness. Helpless sinners can survive only by grace. Our strength is futile in itself; we are spiritually impotent without the assistance of a merciful God. We may dislike giving our attention to God's wrath and justice, but until we incline ourselves to these aspects of God's nature, we will never appreciate what has been wrought for us by grace. Even Edwards's sermon on sinners in God's hands was not designed to stress the flames of hell. The resounding accent falls not on the fiery pit but on the hands of the God who holds us and rescues us from it. The hands of God are gracious hands. They alone have the power to rescue us from certain destruction.”  
 ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr - The Holiness of God*

### *Disclaimer*

The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or it's leadership.



The West Suffolk Epistle is a monthly publication of West Suffolk Baptist Church.  
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Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of the month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.