

The limits of the gospel

By [David Williams](#)

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I talked with her face-to-face a handful of times, not enough to really get to know her.

Through the latticework of interconnection that shapes a town, there were others in our congregation who did know her. They knew her far better than I did. But though I reached out to her a couple of times, my interactions were too fleeting, too far removed, abstracted through social media.

I'd sat with her in the social hour, listened to her as she spoke of her life. She'd come to a Bible study, once, and sat there trying to stay awake. You could feel her lostness, a muted frustration hanging about her like a cloud. She'd had a kid, then another kid, sweet little ones born into chaos. She'd struggled to find work, to find her place, to find a path up and out. That path just never surfaced.

Because between her and the way out there was, evidently, the heroin. It's a beast of a substance, that narcotic. Not the worst. Meth is worse. But heroin, like all opiates before and after, drains a life, sucks it down into a vortex of synthetic pleasure, supplanting the organic pains of existence with itself. And then it smothers the joys of life, too, and all feeling, until there is only heroin.

The news of her overdose was not a surprise. It flitted across my social media consciousness as friends tagged her orphaned Facebook identity, which is how our brave new world tells us of death these days.

What more could have been done? I do not know. People who knew her could have had her arrested, I suppose, hard-knocking her into recovery. But our system of retributive, punitive justice would not have worked for her healing and restoration. It would have made re-entry hard, and staying clean hard, and everything hard. Sometimes hard is necessary. I'm just not sure, though, that it always works to the benefit of a recovering addict.

And what of the church? What more could we have done? When she came, she was welcomed. We talked with her. We were her friends. We neither judged nor condemned, and made it clear she could always have a place here. When she needed direct and material help, we gave it. The door was open.

I suppose we could have gone and banged on her door, been intrusive, pressed up into her life. We could have heaved her bodily into the healing circle of a 12-step program.

But those programs, like our faith itself, only work if a struggling soul is ready to embrace them. They cannot be imposed. They must be chosen.

And those are the limits of the gospel, the most that we can do.

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