

A Good Word for George Finley
February 2, 2010

I can hardly imagine anyone who better represents the American mythology, the very best of the aspirations and intentions of this nation, than George Finley. The American mythology is larger than life, but for this son of the south this great myth, which dares us to believe that hard work and perseverance, honor, valor, and integrity are the substance of dreams come true, this myth made him a man of the greatest worth. Tom Brokaw says he was of the Greatest Generation. I say it would not have mattered into what generation George Finley was born, for the character that made him who he is, is eternal. Honor. Integrity. Respect. Industry. Ingenuity. Resourcefulness. Kindness. Humility. Faith. These traits, especially as George embodied them, are a recipe for *life lived abundantly* (John 10.10), in any age.

Now before I continue, sounding as I may, as if George Finley were perfect. Let me make it clear that I know he was not. His family knows he was not. As we sat together yesterday and the accolades began to pour forth, Dot quickly interjected, with a glimmer in her eye, “But he wasn’t perfect. He was human.” But in the next 90 minutes I only learned every one of the faults that I already knew George possessed. Which is to say, quite simply, other than being human... none. Other than being human... they couldn’t clue me in to a single one. It isn’t often that you give a family a chance to reflect, honestly, even when preparing a eulogy, and some word of imperfection doesn’t show. But there was nothing.

Yes, George was human. About all we can say to that is thanks be to God! But his human imperfection was wrapped in a cloak of kindness. “You hardly ever heard my father say a bad word about anyone,” David said. “Unless, of course, you dared to stand at the line of scrimmage, and take a snap from center, wearing any color besides Clemson Orange.” Georgia Tech... NC State... USC... well, George reserved his very hardest words for any quarterback

who would challenge his mighty Tigers. I suppose that could be considered an imperfection... if you wear garnet and black, or you are not a football fan!

Not only did George speak no ill words against anyone, they tell me that George spoke no “bad words,” at all. It was against his code of ethics to use vulgar language, though he sometimes had to caution other family members... “the children... the children are in the room.” In their more than 62 years together, Dot can remember only one word. One word. It’s a lengthy story that doesn’t bear repeating here, but suffice it to say it involved overhead plumbing, and a very unfortunately-directed flow of unleashed, well, the stuff that comes out of suddenly unleashed plumbing! But, with a face full of that stuff, who could have blamed – even George! The best part of the story, though, is that he turned to his bride, who had watched the whole messy scene and was still startled this uncharacteristic outburst, and after a moment of pause they both burst into laughter. OK... so there’s another imperfection. If you’re counting.

George was, in a word, punctual. “You could set your watch by him.” A child of his depression-era raising, George knew that time is money, and he knew that if your own time is money, then so is everyone else’s. It was a sin of cardinal selfishness to waste someone else’s time, because they were waiting on you. The Finley family always arrived early. George and Dot often getting to weddings a full hour before the bride made her entrance. More than once, Dot remembers circling the block, exploring a visiting city, waiting to be on time. On one occasion, they even arrived early enough time to visit a nearby hospital, and still get to the church before the music began. And when he traveled with the family, he never stopped along the way. That would take too much time. It’s a good thing he had boys, I suppose, because George always kept a paper cup in the car, just in case of an emergency! And he passed on his punctuality to his sons: “Always leave early,” he instructed them, “you never know when you might have a flat tire

on the way.” So, if you can count wasting your own time, so you won’t waste anyone else’s time a sin, add one more to the list.

George was an avid golfer. (Which itself might be a sin, come to think of it.) He played, regularly, with Allison Wood, and the two friends became so punctual, so regular in their routine, that when they’d arrive at their favorite “19th hole” their waitress would have their plates of cornbread, black eyed peas, and turnip greens waiting for them. It took George almost 50 years, but he did finally hit one hole-in-one! And he was an avid fisherman, for years taking an annual deep-sea outing with Duke Power colleagues and clients. Once, the fishing was so poor that George bought fish on the way home and presented them to his wife, wrapped in grocery store paper. What wife wouldn’t be suspicious of a week-long “fishing trip,” and a catch of store-bought fish!? Well, if fidelity is a sin, move this one to the top of the list, because Dot didn’t even flinch – even with this fish story!

If we’re enumerating his faults, we might as well add hard work to the list. The boys have vivid memories of their father, bent over the coffee table, blue prints of power sub-stations spread far and wide, as he poured over these plans till late in the night. It’s no surprise that George climbed the ranks of the company he served for 32 years. But dedication and commitment are their own rewards. At his retirement party, hundreds who had worked with or for George at Duke Power came to sing the praises of “the best boss I ever had.” When son, Keith went to work for Duke, he had instant name recognition and a leg-up on the competition. “Oh... you’re George Finley’s son!” In capitalism’s survival-of-the-fittest system, it is not expected that you put anyone before yourself, but since George always sought the well-being of his employees over his own, securing their own pay raises and bonuses before his... well, chalk one more up to error.

If you need one more sin to add to the list, you might as well put his love of his mother-in-law. What man in his right mind would invite his wife's mother to live with them, without even consulting his wife, and to allow her to stay there for 25 years? Even after she went to the nursing home, even on those difficult days when a daughter could not bring herself to see her mother in such a condition, George was there. Faithfully attending. Visiting. Comforting. Consoling. Being the son-in-law of a mother's dreams.

The final flaw I should point out in this now long list of failings is George's inability to... dance. Yes, according to his wife, who danced every night of her youth, George Finley hadn't a rhythmic bone in his whole body. Though this was their first date (Dot says "We hobbled on a bit!"), it was also their last dancing date! They dated for six more months in England, as George faithfully served his country there, but from that first date on, George was Dot's "movie date," as she called him. After a breakup, due to the recently announced GI Bill, which set George's sights on getting an education back in the U.S., even after she gave away George's high school ring to another beau, George was forgiving, and he and Dot started dating again, long distance this time.

The final straw that pushed George into engagement may have been a chance encounter with "the lovely Mary Jane¹" back in Mountville, SC – the only remaining, unmarried girl in their high school class of 13. It's safe to say that Dot was a bit more of a "looker" than the lovely Mary Jane – but however questionable the means, I have no doubt God was in it, because after little more than a year of international correspondence, Dot had a ring, and a ticket to New York City, USA. She arrived on a Sunday – and they were married by Wednesday evening, in a

¹ In a moment of failed discretion I used that Mountville girl's real name in the eulogy, and had a bit of an out-of-body experience – listening to my less-than-complimentary words and suddenly wondering if "Mary Jane" were actually in the audience! (Mountville is a small place – maybe someone else in the family married her!) I was assured later, however, that no one was married to Mary Jane, but I have changed her name here, in print, to protect the innocent. "Mary Jane," please forgive me. (It was Dot's story!)

Mountville wedding that had been completely planned before her plane touched down on U.S. tarmac.

Now, to summarize: George Finley spoke ill of opposing quarterbacks, and literally had a sewer-mouth, once. He was punctual to a fault; faithful to the bitter end. He worked too hard and always put other people first. He loved his mother-in-law, and George Finley... could not dance. Such is the legacy he leaves to a still-doting wife of nearly 63 years, to two sons inspired by his example, to three much beloved grandchildren, one great-grand, and a large family he dearly loved, and to too many friends to count.

After this sad litany, if I had to end by trying to say something good about George it would be this. Daughter-in-law Sherry says that George could be characterized by three loves: faith, family, and Clemson football. Not a bad triumvirate of values, I'd say, and George was an admirable champion of all. His was a gregarious lover of his football team and his family. He loved the annual family reunion, and everyone was always glad to see him on the horizon. Even when his children and grandchildren made decisions with which he disagreed, he stood quietly by, not judging, not loving any less, but quietly waiting for them to come back to the "center" which George had taught and demonstrated. And that center, for George, revolved around his quiet faith. A faith which persuaded by steadfast example, not by puffed up speech.

Every Sunday when George arrived early to prepare for his work collecting and counting that day's offering, he would stop by my office. "How are you today, George?" I'd ask. Every single time I asked, he responded with a twinkle in his eye, "Not too bad for an old guy!" I guess not, George.

If only you and I could live as he did, we could also die with his confident assurance. “I’m ready to meet my Lord,” he told me the week before he died, and he told his family, “I’m going straight in.” For an old guy like George Finley, there could simply be no other way.

For George Finley – Thanks Be to God!