

THE MAKING OF A SLOWPOKE

*If I wanted my children to obey certain codes of conduct,
I would have to do the same.*

by Dean Merrill

On March 26, 1983, my actions suddenly became bizarre. My friends wondered about my mental health; strangers found me exasperating, if not un-American. My odd behavior even earned me scowls and threats, stares and head shaking.

On that fateful day, I began to take speed limits literally.

Actually, I was forced into it. I can assure you, I was on no crusade for righteousness or moral purity. As an educated Christian who prided himself on rising above legalism, I disdained the thought of bondage to petty stipulations.

Then came a West Coast business trip. Since my appointments straddled a weekend, I brought my wife along for a second honeymoon. We flew to Portland, Ore., rented a Buick Skylark, and

checked into a motel. On Saturday we started a two-day drive to San Francisco.

"Isn't this a joy?" Grace said, relishing the Cascade Mountains as we skimmed down the interstate. Somewhere south of Eugene, Ore., we turned onto a two-lane road to cross the Coast Range and then explore the scenic wonders along the Pacific.

The road was deserted. Once we left a hamlet named Drain, there were hardly any houses on the rugged terrain.

We were cruising down a long incline, practicing a duet for Sunday-morning worship in two weeks (How much more wholesome can you get?), when flashing red lights appeared in my mirror. We weren't alone on this byway after all. How fast had I been driving? Sixty-three, maybe 64?

I pulled to the shoulder and hopped out. Someone once told me you should always go to meet the officer. It shows openness, confidence, and "I-didn't-do-nothing-did-I?" innocence. Besides, you shake out some of the surging adrenaline, and if you're taller than he, you may

be able to control the conversation.

"Good morning. May I see your license, please?" He was younger than I was and half a head shorter.

I fished out my Illinois certificate and answered his follow-up questions. "Yes, that is my current address. No, this is a rental car."

"Well, I clocked you doing 70."

I alleged that that was hard to believe, but after all, the rental car speedometer might not be reliable, and besides, those slopes were a bit of a challenge for a flatlander. But I'd be more watchful from then on. . . .

He'd already begun to write.

"Since you're from out of state," he concluded, handing me my citation, "you'll probably want to mail the fine to the address on the back—55 dollars."

And then, with a crack of a smile: "Have a good day."

The mellifluous day suddenly filled with death, the amorous mood turned acrid. I crawled back into the Skylark, restarted the engine, and edged onto the highway. *Eccch!* Grace moved closer, whispering condolences. Her

quiet "It's all right, honey" tried vainly to melt my self-condemnation. *Fifty-five dollars!* This trip was supposed to celebrate our togetherness, and I had torpedoed it all.

A full 20 miles passed before I spoke and then only with long pauses. "Well," I began, "I guess it's time to re-examine my speed-limit philosophy. If this is gonna cost us that much money, I might as well learn something."

Gradually I admitted that my practice up until then had been to drive whatever speed was "safe." Everyone knows the first few miles per hour over the posted limit constitutes the fudge zone, where cops give you the benefit of the doubt. My open-road policy, for example, had been to drive 62 or 63. In a 30 mph zone, 37 was close enough. "Make the best time you can without attracting attention" was my motto.

And it had worked well. I could remember only one other speeding ticket in 24 years of driving. Or were there two?

"Reedsport—8 miles," the sign read—the county seat to which I would involuntarily mail my contribution.

My musing continued, this time along fatherly lines. "Let's switch the topic from speed limits to sex," I said to Grace. "How will I feel if Nathan, when he's 17, decides to adopt my philosophy of not necessarily sticking to the rules, but doing what he can get away with?" I grimaced at the corner I had painted myself into.

Suddenly my mind reverted to when Nathan, around kindergarten age, figured out the speedometer and its connection to those black and white signs with numbers along the street. Every parent has endured such a stage.

"Daddy, the sign says 40, and you're going 45." I'd wearily answer like every other adult: "Yeah, well, I'm doing all right—you're safe—don't worry." After a month or so, he shut up. Later I endured the whole process again with his younger sisters.

What do I want to say to myself and my kids about complying with laws, both God's and the state's?

Another long pause.

"OK. What would it cost me to take speed limits at face value?" I said.

Grace listened.

"From our house to the airport is 30 miles. If I drove 55 instead of 63. . . ." my mental calculator whirled, "I'd lose three or four minutes." Not as painful as I thought.

The 260-mile trip to my parents' house in Iowa would add maybe an extra half



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hour on the road. Gradually I ran out of rationalizations. With a needle sitting in the dashboard telling me how fast I was driving and clear signs along the road telling me how fast to drive, I couldn't plead ambiguity. The law said match the needle to the signs. The only remaining question was: Would I obey or rebel?

This was more than minutia. It involved discipleship. God put His finger on a common but substantive part of my behavior. Would I let that too cordial state trooper be, in the words of Romans 13, God's servant to do me good? Or would I in essence tell him, his ticket book, and his statutory code to bug off?

I took a deep breath. "OK. From now on, I shall become the slowest thing on the road," I announced.

Grace laughed. Fortunately for me, the rental car had cruise control. I could make just one decision instead of repeatedly easing up on the accelerator. I punched the button, settled in at 55, and resigned myself to watching a never-ending movie of receding taillights.

However, it was one thing for me to drive 55 mph on a semileisurely trip through the redwoods. It was quite another to drive 30 mph on my way to work Monday morning when I was already running late. My resolve to obedience went through a full-scale trial once back in the urban rat race.

But again, I learned the important lesson that obedience is indivisible. You

cannot obey part time and call it good enough. James said this regarding the Ten Commandments (2:10, 11). Partial obedience still leaves you a lawbreaker.

I also learned another, less eternal truth about the new digital timepieces that made me so compulsive about individual minutes. In the olden days, when the big hand was a tad to the right of vertical, I called it 8 o'clock. Now, big luminous numerals, 8:03:37, stare at me. I cower in shame at being late and say I should have driven faster. But instead I should have started sooner.

I sealed my fate a few nights later when my children saw the ticket. "Here's what you get when you break the law," I explained, their eyes opening wide with wonder. When I told them what I'd done, and how much it was going to cost, they gasped.

"Do you remember when you first learned to read a speedometer?"

"Yes."

"And you remember how I told you not to worry about a few miles per hour here or there?"

They remembered.

"Well, Daddy has decided that is wrong. I know exactly what the law says and need to do it. So from now on, you have permission to tell me when you notice me driving faster than what the signs say."

They loved the idea. I thought I'd just signed my torture warrant.

But as the weeks and months passed, I discovered that speed-limit driving didn't have to be confining or exasperating. Rather, it was freeing. I no longer calculate what's "safe" in a particular situation or ask myself, "Is this a speed trap? Should I stick to the center lane so I'll go unnoticed?" My mental energies now go toward productive things.

The greatest freedom is not watching for policemen anymore. They can sit behind all the tricky billboards they want. My driving habits bore them, so we ignore one another.

Granted, fellow drivers are not always so placid. Occasionally I feel an urgent soul breathing behind me on a two-lane road. But in a perverse way, I enjoy helping people obey the law. Being salt in the world occasionally means being a good irritant, doesn't it?

I admit I've become strange, and I suppose I'll always be a little out of style. The payoffs are mostly internal. But since that's where I live my life and faith, I'm in a good spot to enjoy them. Besides, for 55 bucks, I think I'm getting my money's worth. ■