

One of the many reasons we champion the NBC show [Friday Night Lights](#) is its understanding and depiction of human dynamics. At its core, this is not a show about football - no more than, say, Whit Stillman's film [The Last Days of Disco](#) is about disco. It is a show about the human condition, and as such, it is a show about [judgment and love](#). Two of the realities or forces that are closest to the human heart. Certainly the two that we most like to talk about here at Mockingbird.

When we talk about [judgment and love](#), we are talking about two alternate responses to the problem of poor performance – in life, in football, in marriage, in career, etc. Theologically, "poor performance" is simply another way of getting at the whole idea of sin – of falling short – and the only response to sin that ultimately matters is God's. So we are first and foremost alluding to a vertical dynamic, where we are always the object, never the subject. This is very important to remember, lest all this talk be heard as mere prescription. *We are not the responding party, we are the ones being responded to.* Which is simply to say that even though we are constantly responding to others' poor performances (romantically, relationally, professionally, etc), if we're looking for spiritual/religious metaphors and analogies, we're looking for situations where we relate to the poor performer/victim/sufferer.

Put another way, given our inescapable "creatureliness" (i.e. our limitations as human beings), it can be enormously helpful to translate vertical (God → Man) dynamics into more understandable, concrete reference points – otherwise we run the risk of "living in our heads", do we not? So part of this whole Mbird project is to keep an eye open for scenarios where we see vertical realities (doctrine, theology, etc) playing out on a horizontal level. Occasionally we catch glimpses of this in pop culture, and Friday Night Lights is one of those occasions.

In Friday Night Lights, Dillon Panthers/Lions football coach Eric Taylor is frequently a stand-in for God, just as our parents are frequently stand-ins for God. Though very human in and of himself (his marriage to Tami is a crash-course in real-life marital dynamics), he understands that for many of the young men in his care, he is a father-figure, and as a father-figure, also a God-figure. This isn't up for debate; it's simply the way humans transfer and function. I do it, you do it, we all do it. But what's so wonderfully profound (and touching) about FNL, is that Coach Taylor seems to have an amazing grasp of the power the two alternate responses mentioned above have on his players; he understands the "office of the keys" ([Dr. Paulson](#)) instinctively - when to bring the hammer down, and when to overlook, enable, forgive and love.

This is just as true in relationships as it is in team sports. We all know the difference between criticism and "space", especially when we are on the receiving end, and we know that this difference makes all the, um, difference.



Which brings me to one of the more profound examples of [Judgment and Love](#) in Friday Night Lights. It has to do with the star running back Brian "Smash" Williams *[Spoilers Ahead]*. On the surface, Smash is just another a cocky jock, eternally speaking of himself in the third person and hitting on everyone else's girlfriend. But as the series progresses, we see underneath a sensitive, insecure young man, whose gifted-ness on the field is matched by the crushing responsibility he feels for his struggling family's well-being and future. He knows that his football skills are their ticket out of the projects, etc.

In the first season, which is Smash's junior year, he finds out that a major recruiter is coming to watch him play. A man whose "prospect list" functions as a defacto scholarship guarantee. As the game nears, we see Smash get more and more anxious. His first interaction with the scout, Grady Hunt, is not exactly positive. Grady expresses concerns about Smash's strength and size. So going in, Smash knows that he is being scrutinized, and begins to view the upcoming game as the make-or-break moment of his life (as only high school juniors can). In Smash's mind, this isn't a case of need-to-do-this-to-get-that (1st use of the Law), it is a case of his entire life, value and identity being on the line (2nd use). [The clip](#) begins at the start of the game. Watch clip FNL1.

Scrutiny prompts failure, clear and simple. It does in the Bible and it does in life. The Law produces its opposite – Romans 5:20. Grady Hunt is not God, but he might as well be. We've all been in situations where we know we're being watched, and it rarely brings out our best performance. As if to underline the uncompromising nature of what Grady represents, we have the line "they don't want to hear excuses, son". Fans of the show know what happens next. In the very next episode Smash

starts taking steroids... Par for the course, as far as the fruit of judgment is concerned. Whatever it takes to get ahead.

Thankfully, the story does not end there. Smash goes on to blow out his knee during his senior year, losing the football scholarship that he eventually wins. Totally dejected, he is forced to work at the Dairy Freeze to make ends meet for his family (in keeping with the downward trajectory of most of the characters on FNL). Coach Taylor being Coach Taylor, does not give up on Smash. He approaches him one night and offers to work with him off-hours and do everything in his power to get Smash into college and playing again. Smash goes along with it, but one gets the sense that he only does so to appease the coach, who he greatly admires.

Fast-forward a little ways, and the coach has arranged a try-out for Smash with Texas A&M. [This](#) is what happens. Watch clip FNL2.



Love comes in the form of the coach stepping out on behalf of Smash, doing for Smash what Smash cannot do for himself. What may sound like pure exhortation ("God has placed you here..." etc) is heard by Smash as love and confidence. To drive the point home, the coach brilliantly takes Smash back to a moment of inspiration (a moment of freedom in a previous game). He does not offer criticism. Love births goodness.

The final, and perhaps most important thing to say here has to do with Smash's response. To me, this is directly analogous to the Gospel.

Smash is compelled to thank the coach. Uncharacteristically, he does not dwell on himself or his own achievement (just as the drowning man never says "did you see how incredibly well I grasped that life preserver?!" ...); his first stop is to honor the one who made it all possible. Love engenders a response – a heartfelt one – and that response is gratitude. Smash's life will never be the same. He won't be forgetting that moment any time soon - it was what people call a "game-changer". The coach will be the first person he visits whenever he comes back to town.

Judgment and Love, Criticism and Liberty, Pressure and Space: these are not exact synonyms for Law and Gospel. Of course not. But they're pretty darn close. Seeing the Christian message born out all around us, even in something as seemingly insignificant as a football game, is such a huge encouragement. And we could all use a little encouragement. Clear Eyes Full Hearts!

Friday Night Lights is available to stream on Netflix.