

The Christian Life – Problems Christians Face Selfishness

[NKJ Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Our talk today is the next in our series about problems that affect 21st century society and also impact Christians. We are thinking today about selfishness. This is a very real challenge to us all as, if you are like me, it comes naturally! We can see it demonstrated all around us and feel it inside us. The anagram WIIFM is very prevalent everywhere, it means “what’s in it for me?” We are so used to this idea that we are sometimes surprised and taken aback when someone does something for us or gives us something and tells us there is no charge. This selfishness is totally contrary to what the Lord Jesus taught and therefore what is seen in practice in the Christian Church should reflect His teachings.

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, is often referred to as “the seed plot of the scriptures” as many concepts and teachings that are fleshed out in the rest of the scriptures are first introduced here. It is the same with this thought of selfishness. Selfishness is very closely linked to pride, thinking of one’s self instead of others and in Genesis chapter 3 verses 1- 3 we see this exact thing. Satan questions what God has really said then tells Eve that by doing what God had prohibited her and Adam from doing, they would actually be like God. There is no more appealing thing for someone for whom self-aggrandisement is paramount than the thought that they can be as God! Rather than thinking about people we have met who fall into this category, we do well to recognise this in our own nature and seek, by God’s help, to do something about it.

If you look up “self” in the dictionary, there are a lot of descriptions that flow from its meaning and associated words. I found it interesting, though, that in the dictionary I use, selfishness is given as meaning “concentration upon self: the selfish theory of morals - that man acts from the consideration of what will give him the most pleasure.” Back to “what’s in it for me”! Then the very next description is selfless, which is given as “having no regard to self.”

You could not have two more contrary ideas and it draws into very sharp focus what marked our Lord Jesus as He was here and we have so beautifully documented for us in the Gospels. It is these things that I want to bring to your attention today and show how these are then expanded upon in the Epistles which formed the teaching that turned this world upside down in the first century and has continued to affect the lives of men, women, boys and girls from that day to this. It continues to be the basis of blessing and joy.

The first portion of scripture I would like us to read today is from the epistle of Paul to the Philippians. I find myself often turning to this epistle as it is always very practical. I also find it very useful to think of each of the four chapters in the following way.

In chapter 1, we get Christ seen as the life of the believer. In chapter 2, Christ is given as our example. We move in to chapter 3 and Paul puts forward Christ as our object and finally in chapter 4 we have Christ as our strength. It is from chapter 2 I would like to read first, from verse 3 through to 11. This is the example, as we have just said, that we should be looking to follow.

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The apostle is very powerfully drawing the contrast between “selfish ambition” and “made Himself of no reputation.” I remember as a young person being very struck when an old friend now long with the Lord told us that he was in for a promotion at work and a colleague who was also in for this job told him that he would do anything he could to ensure he got the job as it meant everything to him. My old friend told him that if it means that much to him, he hopes he gets it as there were more important things in his life. We often sing a hymn that starts with the lines; “From the palace of His glory, from the home of joy and love, came the Lord Himself to seek us.” This I believe is the ultimate example of making nothing of oneself in order to bless others. Is my service and good works simply to enhance my own reputation or make myself look good or is it for the good of others and the glory of God?

I find it quite staggering to consider that the Lord chose every aspect of His life here. It would still have been astonishing grace for Him to step into time if He had chosen to come to this world as an actual King, born in a palace and with all this world’s wealth and luxury at his disposal. He could have enjoyed an easier life before coming forth in public ministry but, no, His whole life from the very outset was one of poverty and concerned more with others than self. His very first recorded words in Luke chapter 2 verse 49 are very important to see the desire and object of His life: “And He said to them, “Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” This was when He was only 12 years of age as He was travelling back from Jerusalem with His family.

In verse 3 we also get this instruction that we have to esteem others better than ourself. This is something that very much goes against what we are by nature and what society would tell us to do. This is then given a practical application in verse 4 that we are not only to look out for our own interests but also for the interests of others. The linking of these two verses is critical as if I am thinking, esteeming as our verse puts it, myself to be better than others, then my own interests will be paramount and consequently the interests of others will be pushed aside.

In every society and for as far back as we want to go, a person’s wealth has a big impact on how people around them view them and how they view themselves. The Bible says that the love of money is a root of all evil. This is often misquoted in terms of money itself being the root of all evil, but it is the love of money that is the problem. However, we do need to recognise that whether we have a lot of money or very little, the pursuit of it and therefore the hold that it can have on us can be very dangerous. It can also become very easy for us to think incorrectly about others who have more or less money than we have. We can either look down our noses at people who have less than us or feel so inferior to those who have more so that we would want nothing to do with them. There is no room for either in the 2 verses we have read.

There are many examples in the Bible of how riches can be a snare but I want to highlight two of them. Firstly, in Luke chapter 16 the Lord tells us about a rich man who is not named and a poor man named Lazarus. Life was good for the rich man; he had plenty of the best food to eat and

dressed in the best of clothes. In today's terms, he would have a nice big car, live in a big house at the end of a drive where there was a gate that would keep everything safe. The Lord doesn't criticise him for that, but he does point out that he ignored the poor man, Lazarus, who lay at his gate begging for food. It is really interesting that today, as would have been the case then, everyone would have known the name of the rich man but not the poor man who is the beggar and yet in the sight of the Lord it is the other way around. It is the rich man's selfishness and lack of concern for the beggar that shows he had no time for God in his life and it is this that lands him in Hades. I am sure the rich man didn't know the name of the beggar; how would he have? It would appear he didn't take the time to even notice this poor man, he just went straight past! How do I react in the sight of the rich and famous compared to the poor and lowly? The self promotion part of me would want to get to know the rich and famous but what's in it for me to get to know the poor and lowly? The King of kings became the lowliest of all in order to redeem and bless the lowest of all, and that includes me!

Then in Matthew chapter 19 and Mark chapter 10 we have another very sad incident in the Lord's life presented to us. Another rich man is involved but this time we are told he was young. Although he was young and rich, he recognised something about Jesus and he was concerned about eternal matters. How often when we are young and everything seems to be going our way we can be taken up only with the things of this life. I think it is fair to assume, as we are not told otherwise, that he had his health and strength normally associated with youth. He was successful and upstanding in the community, very moral, at least by his own appraisal, and I am sure he would have been well known, and yet again the Holy Spirit sees fit not to give us his name. He wanted eternal life but he wanted to do something for it himself. The Lord Jesus then engages him in respect of the commandments laid out by Moses. The young man was very bold in his assertion that he had kept these and begins with the last five of the ten and describes how he had kept these from a child up. It is crucial to notice that these are in respect of others whereas the first five are in respect of how we treat God. However, we need to notice that as much as he was very sincere, the Lord saw right into his heart and was able to put His finger on the very thing that was a step too far, "... go, sell what you have and give to the poor."

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the Lord then went on to say, "come and follow Me." He may well have done the former and it would have served him no eternal benefit whatsoever even though it may have made him feel better. It is still the same today. We are not blessed eternally by giving away our possessions but by following and trusting the Lord as our Saviour. The point here for this young man was that his earthly possessions had too big a hold on him, more than the desire for eternal life. When the reality of this hit him, the story finishes by simply telling us that he went away sorrowful. Contrast this with the others who were called and accepted gladly, leaving all that they had immediately to follow the Lord. We are not told of any who had to have such a specific instruction. These two rich men illustrate selfishness and the terrible consequences it can have. I often wonder about the internal conflict this young man must have gone through. By deciding that his worldly goods were worth more than eternal life and yet he was still sorrowful, seems odd to me. If our decisions result in us being immediately sorrowful then to my mind we should be reassessing those decisions. Decisions that even seem correct in the short term can often lead to regret in the longer term and we do well to learn from these as well.

I would also like to mention another type of selfishness that came in to God's people of old and it is highlighted in Malachi chapter 1, in particular verses 7 and 8. God had blessed them greatly time and time again over many years but, by Malachi's time, the people were simply showing nothing more than outward observance to the things of God. They were merely bringing animals to the priests for sacrifice that were blind, lame or sick and had no other value. The priests, who should have known better, were then accepting these as if nothing was amiss. Their worship and service for God was costing them nothing! This is in sharp contrast to the example set many years before by their greatest King, David. In second Samuel chapter 24 we get the wonderful story of when David wanted to build an altar in a particular place in order to make a burnt offering to God.

The owner of that place was insistent that David takes the threshing floor for no cost but David makes it very clear that he will pay the full price for it as he will not offer to God that which cost him nothing. King David also showed great selflessness when the water from the well at Bethlehem, which he so much desired to drink and his mighty men had risked their lives to procure for him, was poured out as an offering to God.

The challenge for us here is do we keep the best of our own things for ourselves and only give to others or God that which does not cost us much or we don't miss? It is therefore wonderful to consider in contrast the way the Lord always put others and their interests before His own. Think of the poor woman who came into the house of Simon the Pharisee and Simon was more interested in her dubious character rather than her love and respect for the Lord. Simon was so much concerned with his own reputation and views that he had forgotten to show the Lord the common courtesy of the day when He arrived at his house and the Lord admonished him for this. (see Luke chapter 7) Then there was the feeding of the multitude when the disciples wanted to send the crowds of people away hungry, both spiritually and physically, because they were tired and did not have enough food for them. The disciples were thinking of themselves and it had caused them to miss the need of the people and the all sufficiency of the Lord Jesus to meet that need. (see Matthew chapter 14)

I often wonder about the motives that prompted the disciples to try to prevent those who were bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this incident in their Gospels. Were the disciples feeling that their ministry was more important than blessing infants and they wanted to keep the Lord and themselves for more important work? This was not how the Lord saw it and was able then to expand His teaching about us all having to have childlike faith. He, once again, made Himself of no reputation.

So we can see that whether it is our first parents back in the garden of Eden, God's ancient people of the Old Testament, or the Lord's disciples when He was here, it is very easy to revert back to what is natural and let our own self be the driving force in our decisions. I have just recently heard of a famous actor of many years ago who said; "I live for myself and I answer to no one." I wonder if he was sorrowful at the end of his short life? Our verses we have read in Philippians tell us that the same mind of humility that marked Christ Jesus should also mark us, a high standard indeed! I do not think the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of things that were unattainable and therefore we do well to remind ourselves of this standard each and every day.

These same scriptures, however, move on even further. It is not only about the Lord of Glory laying aside the glory of heaven to be found as a Man in this world. The apostle Paul then tells us that, as a Man, He humbled Himself to become obedient to death, even the death of the cross. This is even more staggering! The eternal Son of God becomes a Man then goes into death which was something that was completely alien to His blessed person as He was not after Adam's race and so death was not passed on Him as it is on every other man or women since Adam. The fact it was by way of the most barbaric and abhorred deaths known to man at that time, crucifixion, prompts the apostle to, as it were, underline this by saying; "even the death of the cross."

As I have just said, death could have no hold on the Lord by natural means as death is the direct result of sin, and the Lord had no part of sin. Hebrews chapter 4 verse 15 tells us: [He] "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin." So, how could He have died? I believe the answer is most clearly given in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 21 where we read: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The Lord was made to be the very thing that He had no part in, that is sin, in order that sin can be dealt with in righteousness and be put to death. There surely can be no more selfless act in order that we might be blessed eternally!

Finally, I would just like to leave with us some examples of everyday aspects of life that can be either viewed selfishly or selflessly. In Ephesians we are instructed to be completely humble and gentle. In his letter to Timothy, Paul urges him to be kind to everyone. He urges the Colossians to let their speech be always gracious. Then in Philippians they are told that everything should be done without complaining and that their gentleness be evident to all. Also, as we remember the Christmas story, we can easily forget the inn keeper who offered his stable when everywhere else was full. We have already mentioned the feeding of the five thousand but we can forget the young lad who willingly gave his loaves and fishes. Then there was the man who gave his upper room for the Lord and the disciples to use to celebrate the Passover and then finally Joseph of Arimathea who gave his own tomb for the Lord to be buried in. All of these things and many other examples would not have been seen if the hearts of these people had been filled with selfishness.

Thank you for listening today to our talk T1187 on selfishness and I trust that this will be a real encouragement and a challenge to us all.

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