

The Heart of the Matter

Lesson 5: The Christian's Attitude Toward Self

1. Instinctive Selfishness

We enter this world with a powerful sense of self-concern. Babies are “programmed” to loudly and incessantly broadcast their needs so that they will be addressed. After all, the infant can do nothing for itself; it is totally dependent upon others for its care.

But the maturing process should move a person away from self-absorption toward an awareness of others around him. If this change does not occur or is stunted and a person's focus remains primarily upon himself, that life will never fulfill the purposes of God for it.

2. Legitimate Personal Needs

The prospect of survival in this world – to eat, to be sheltered and clothed – demands a great deal of effort and a corresponding amount of rest. Other activities of self-interest are also normal and permissible within reason.

But one of man's greatest personal needs that often goes unrecognized is to be valued by others. The person who isolates himself from his fellow man and concentrates only upon himself will be a very lonely and unfulfilled man indeed.

3. Self-Love and Self-Esteem

We hear on every hand by the purveyors of pop psychology that we should love ourselves and esteem ourselves highly. There is certainly a legitimate and healthy realm of self-respect. *“For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church”* (Eph. 5:29). It is natural for a human being to care for himself

physically, and self-harm is abnormal and demented.

Further, a proper love for oneself becomes the basis of our treatment of others. Jesus said, quoting the Law of Moses, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself...”* (Mark 12:31). His own universal ethic also implies healthy self-regard: *“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets”* (Matt. 7:12). Such standards assume that we properly esteem ourselves and seek good things in life. It is true that much physical and emotional harm is done to others by people who hate and despise themselves.

Those with a proper self-image will have healthy relationships with others, and they will seek an eternal relationship with God. To love oneself as a creature of God, wondrously made in His image and likeness, and recognize our worth and value on that basis is not improper.

4. Vanity and Pride

On the other end of the spectrum lies the person who has an inordinate amount of interest in himself and often shows it by attitudes of arrogance or pompousness. Such can arise either through a genuine sense of superiority to others or over-compensation for feelings of inadequacy or insecurity. Whatever the underlying cause, the arrogant person resents anything or anyone that draws attention or acclaim away from them.

Paul exhorts: *“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit ...”* (Phil. 2:3). “Conceit” (vainglory, KJV) is a compound word *kenodoxia*, “from *kenos*, vain, empty, *doxa*, glory” (*Vine*, Vol. 4, p.

182). The adjectival form of the word is found in Gal. 5:26: *“Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”*

Haughtiness or pride is condemned as a fleshly and rebellious attitude. Of “haughty” (*huperephanos*) Vine says: “showing oneself above others (*huper*, over, *phainomai*, to appear), though often denoting preeminent, is always used in the N.T. in the evil sense of arrogant, disdainful, haughty ... Rom. 1:30, 2 Tim 3:2, Jas. 4:6, 1 Pet 5:5; in the last two it is set in opposition to *tapeinos*, humble, lowly” (Vol. 2, p. 198).

Another word translated “lifted up with pride” (KJV) or “puffed up with pride” (NKJ) in 1 Tim 3:6 and 6:4 means “to wrap in smoke,” i.e., to have one’s vision obscured by self-importance. Yet another word translated “puffed up” means to inflate, as a bellows (1 Cor. 4:16, 18-19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4; Col. 2:18).

These words all describe attitudes that *go beyond* what is normal self-interest. Such attitudes are not merely self-centered but interfere with the legitimate concern we should have for others.

5. Keeping Self in Perspective

Paul exhorts us to *“look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others”* (Phil. 2:4). Our genuine love for others will lead us to use our resources – time, money, wisdom, etc. – for their good. We are to be stewards, not hoarders, of the blessings God has given to us.

Paul told the Corinthians, *“I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls,”* though he poignantly adds, *“the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved”* (2 Cor. 12:15). Jesus certainly wasn’t appreciated by the multitudes for which He was dying.

What is the motivation for subordinating one’s needs for the sake of others? It is

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful; all things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being. [1 Corinthians 10:23-24]

not because such is always appreciated, but rather it is the very nature of the God we serve. God’s selfless love and concern for us

surpass any response of our gratefulness or any sense of our intrinsic value.

Jesus often spoke in terms of selflessness:

Matt. 19:30 – *“But many who are first will be last, and the last first”* (cf. 20:16).

Matt. 20:27 – *“And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave.”*

Matt. 23:12 – *“And whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (cf. Luke 14:11; 18:14).

6. What Are We?

The truth is, we are flawed, fallible human beings who have little reason to think that the universe revolves around us. We struggle with sin and temptation; we battle ignorance; we fail others around us through callous indifference or unintentional distraction. We are people in need of grace, mercy and forgiveness. If we truly come to see ourselves in this light, we will find the love and compassion for others that God expects us to have.

Questions for Discussion

1. Cite a clear example where Satan tried to persuade Jesus to focus upon Himself to the detriment of others.
2. What makes some people so sensitive to the real and/or imagined slights or disapproval of others? How can we overcome such debilitating sensitivity?
3. Evaluate your own daily routine and identify how much time you have in the course of a day to serve others. Discuss in class how to best use these opportunities.
4. Discuss the phrase *“men will be lovers of themselves”* (2 Tim. 3:2). To what degree of self-love is Paul speaking?
5. In whom should we glory (1 Cor. 1:29-31; 10:31; 2 Cor. 10:17)? Does this mean we can’t tell others of our achievements?
6. Discuss an unhealthy appetite for the approval of men. Consider passages like 2 Cor. 10:12; John 5:44; 12:42-43. Whose approval is most important (cf. 2 Cor. 10:18; 1 Cor. 4:5)?
7. How would you reason with a man or woman who hesitated to obey the gospel because they didn’t feel worthy of the sacrifice of Jesus?