

The Lens of Self Determines Sacrifice Philippians 2:1-8

Scripture Reading: Mark 10:35-45

Introduction

Picture the scene:

The pastor has worked all week long on crafting his message

He's spent hours in his study and on his knees as he sought what God would have him say to his flock

In fact, he woke up this Sunday morning, as he does each week, asking God to direct his speech and to conform it to his divine will that nothing would be said amiss and that God's message would be clearly delivered and clearly received

He prayed also that the new couple who had just moved into his neighborhood might accept his invitation and make their way to the church and that they would be warmly welcomed and blessed by doing so

Then, just before he is about to enter the sanctuary for the morning service, he's met by an obviously incensed Fred

Fred's face is red and his fists are clenched as he made the cause of his upset known

"Pastor, they've done it again!" he hissed, "Someone parked in my spot!"

The pastor slumps a bit because he's been here before

Everyone at the church knows that Fred parks in the spot out front under the shade tree and those who have forgotten have learned not to make the mistake twice

But now some innocent newcomer has unknowingly parked in Fred's primo spot causing yet another tirade

As the pastor looks into the sanctuary his shoulders slump a bit more and as he turns back to Fred he says, "Fred, I think your morning is going to get worse before it gets better."

Somewhat confused and defensive Fred grumbled, "Why do you say that?"

Only to have the pastor reply, "Because I just noticed the guests are also sitting in your pew!"

This morning we are continuing our series that I have titled "Corrective Lenses" as we look at how **the lens of self determines our sacrifice**

The unvarnished truth of the matter is that we all have a little and sometimes a lot of "Fred" in us

We know that Jesus says we are to take up our cross and follow him and that anyone who doesn't take up his cross and follow him cannot be his disciple

But our natural tendency is to shy away from sacrifice and to seek satisfaction

And if we're not careful we soon find that we are paying so much attention to our own **comfort** and we've pushed even the thought of our **cross** so far away from us that it's shrunk to insignificance and become easy to ignore

Consumerism

Who can blame us?

As we go about our daily lives we are surrounded by the message that self-satisfaction is the ultimate goal in life and that we deserve to have our every desire met

Advertisers bombard us with images that show people living totally relaxed, comfortable, self-indulgent lives as they hint that those pictures are real, attainable, and what we should all expect

That approach may sell products for their clients but it leads to a great deal of stress and dissatisfaction among the rest of us in the process

And while the attitude that all one's needs should be met is bad enough out in the world, it's devastating when it finds its way into the church

Because how we view life through the lens of self affects our **attitudes**, our **ambitions**, and our **actions**

Our text this morning is **Philippians 2:1-8** – please open your Bibles and follow along as I read the passage

1So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

I. Our Natural State of Selfishness

We know all too well that our natural tendency is to love ourselves and to seek our own interests

In other words, we seem to be hard-wired to be **selfish**

And since our natural condition is to love ourselves, no one has to be taught to seek after self-satisfaction

How many of you, when you were kids, or maybe when you were raising your kids, implemented the **Rule of Sharing?**

The Rule of Sharing that said one person would divide the cookie, candy bar, soda, or whatever and the other got to pick which portion they wanted

It was a good rule because it was the best way to make certain the division was as close to even as possible

Why? Because we're all selfish and all of us would naturally err toward taking the bigger portion for ourselves and we knew deep down that if there was one that was larger the other person would take it because that's what we would do

No one has to be taught to be selfish

In fact, without awareness and diligent effort we will tend to err on the side of loving ourselves too much and begin to think that the world surely must revolve around us and that our every need and want must be catered to

We see this tendency all around us and we despair believing that people are more self-centered now than ever before

But, while there is definitely no lack of self-love in the world today, Scripture tells us it's always been this way

Our first parents were snared by the lure of self-satisfaction when Satan whispered to Eve in **Genesis 3:5** that eating the forbidden fruit would open her eyes and she would "be like God"

And the implication was that God was keeping for himself something that they deserved and, like all of us, Adam and Eve wanted the best for themselves

We shouldn't be surprised that Satan used this tactic – after all, it was his own pride and sense of self-worth that caused his fall

We read in **Ezekiel 28:12** that when God created Satan he was the epitome of perfection, filled with wisdom, and perfect in beauty

But then we read in **Isaiah 14:13-14** that Satan became too focused on himself and he began to covet what was God's saying:

I will ascend to heaven; I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly; I will ascend above the clouds and finally, "I will make myself like the Most High" and his self-serving pride was the cause of his downfall

And we have been following his lead ever since as we all "look out for number one" believing that we head the list

And in the church we all too often find ourselves becoming a lot like Fred from my opening story as we start to think we are somehow special or more important than everyone else

There is an old hymn in our hymnals, #728 in fact, called *Am I a Soldier of the Cross?*, and it contains this lyric in the second verse:

"Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease while others fought to win the prize and sailed on bloody seas?"

In our more honest moments I suspect most of us think, "Yeah, that sounds pretty good to me. If a flowery bed of ease is an option; sign me up. Let others sacrifice; I deserve better."

And when a church member begins to have those thoughts; trouble is soon to follow

Because our **ambitions and actions will tend to be in line with our attitudes**

And it only makes sense

If our attitude is that we are somehow special, that we deserve the best, our motivation will be to serve ourselves

It's what our passage means by "selfish ambition" – that we're motivated by feelings of entitlement

And that attitude will cause us to approach church from the perspective of a consumer as we believe that church should be like Burger King and we should expect to **have it our way**

I'm sure you remember the Burger King jingle:

"Hold the pickle, hold the lettuce, special orders don't upset us; all we ask is that you let us serve it your way.

We can serve your broiled beef Whopper fresh with everything on top, any way you think is proper. Have it your way."

Unfortunately, some churches are trying to cater to our natural tendency of wanting things our way by following the Burger King model and promising to deliver "**church the way you want it**"

But while it's a relatively small matter to put different toppings on a hamburger and allowing each customer to have their burger the way they want it is a good way to run a hamburger chain, it doesn't really translate over to church

Because we know that model only works if everyone wants the same thing and if we are all seeking to please ourselves that is unlikely to be the case because everyone would be looking out for their own interests alone with little or no regard for anyone else

And James tells us in **James 3:16** that trouble awaits the church where people expect to have their every whim and demand catered to –

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

And those feelings *will* exist in a church where self-centered attitudes are allowed to reside

Because if we think we are only deserving of having our way we will grow **resentful** when others fail to comply

We will be **jealous** of what we see as our due and jealous of anyone who we think is being treated better than we are

And the church will be filled with petty **rivalries** as egos go to war to preserve their rightful place at the top of the pecking order

We have a couple of infants in our congregation and if you spend much time around an infant you find that they are very self-centered creatures

They want what they want when they want it and they will cry and pitch a fit when what their demands aren't being met to their satisfaction

That's just the way babies are and we accept it

But when that attitude persists as a child grows that acceptance wanes

No one appreciates a kicking, screaming, red-faces toddler who is not in any real need but simply wanting their way

And that kind of behavior becomes less and less attractive as the child ages

Sadly, some people, like "Fred" never outgrow that behavior and they continue to find ways to make everyone around them miserable when they don't get their way

In the church they might begin to withdraw their support of the church as they hold back in the area of attendance, service, or finances in the hope that they will force a change

I once had a church member warn me that she and her husband had put up with the addition of an acoustic guitar to the worship team, then an electric guitar, and they had even tolerated the fact that we added drums – but if a bass guitar ever made its way onto the platform, they would be going elsewhere

And she was serious – that was the "red line" that we'd better not cross or we would lose their fellowship

A subtle trap

Most of us would never be quite that bold

It's unlikely that any of us would stand up in a business meeting and declare:

"I expect you all to cater to my needs and wants and whatever decisions are made should be made with a view toward keeping me happy"

But we're not above cloaking those exact sentiments in much **more socially acceptable** and even **pseudo-spiritual** ways as we seek to further our agenda of promoting our preferences and protecting our comfort

Selfish attitudes are dangerous mainly because they are so ingrained that we fail to recognize them for what they are

But if selfishness is allowed to go undetected and uncorrected; the church will eventually begin to become closed to any other ideas

Everything will be about preserving the status quo because that's the way we like it and we will fall into the trap of believing that our preferences are right and everyone who thinks differently is wrong

The church will subtly if not openly communicate that this is the way we do things and if you prefer otherwise you can go elsewhere and if you try to change the way we've always done things, you'll be sorry

Any thoughts of personal or corporate sacrifice will disappear as comfort takes the place of the cross

A closed church

And a church that permits self-centered attitudes to take root will soon find that those attitudes are pervasive and the church will be filled with people who are judgmental and unhappy as they experience the inevitable disappointment of people failing to meet *their* needs

All too soon they will find that they have become a church that is all but closed to outsiders

The focus will turn inward because pleasing the members and ensuring their comfort if only to avoid their displeasure will become the most important activities of the church

They will be the church that digs in their heels over the questions like "pews vs chairs in the sanctuary" or engages in "worship music wars" and other relatively minor matters – all for the sake of making sure the members remain comfortable and have church the way they want it

There will be no steps taken to attract new people to the church because that might mean change and the members like things just the way they are thank you very much

But that's not the way it's supposed to be because the biblical model is **sacrifice** on the part of the believer

II. The Biblical Model of Sacrifice

I must say, I don't agree with everything Rick Warren had to say in his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*

But I approach all books, articles, and so forth like I would a fish dinner in that I try to consume whatever meat is there while trying to be careful to spit out for the bones

Because I believe that all truth is God's truth no matter the source because God is truth and truth doesn't exist apart from God and for that reason I can accept truth wherever I find it

And regardless of what might be said about the rest of the book, Mr. Warren hit the nail on the head with the first four words of it when he wrote – "It's not about you"

And it's not – in **verse 3** of our passage this morning we see that we are to:

"...in humility count others more significant than yourselves"

The Greek word translated "humility" literally means "lowliness of mind" and it describes the heart attitude of being without arrogance or having **no sense of self-importance**

In reality then it means seeing yourself as you truly are – not puffing yourself up or tearing yourself down

To exercise humility or to be humble doesn't mean that you think less of yourself – it simply means that you think of yourself less – you don't make yourself the priority

The person who is exercising humility has an accurate appraisal of themselves and their needs and wants

So, Paul says, "have an accurate sense of yourself" and then – "count others more significant than yourselves"

In other words, Paul is saying his readers are to put themselves on the proper plane and then choose to elevate everyone else above them – to be **selfless**

So **humility is an attitude** or an understanding while **being selfless is an action** whereby we intentionally determine that our desires are less important than someone else's and we sacrifice our comfort for the good of someone else

In a sense this is what we do when we entertain guests in our homes

We offer them the best chair; we do what they enjoy; we talk about what they want to talk about; and so forth

We willingly subordinate our preferences to theirs as we place their comfort and enjoyment above our own

We do this same thing when we're in a dating relationship as both people work at making the other one feel special

Trust me, it's the rare man who would ever go to see a romantic comedy if he wasn't seeking to please the object of his affections –

I'm sure there's an analogue for what women endure for their men but I can't think of one

And all is usually well until sometime after the "I do's" are said and one or both give in to their natural tendency to prefer to be served rather than to serve

Sadly, churches can be a lot like a marriage as long associations tend to see us revert back to our natural, selfish state

We may welcome visitors warmly and treat them with kid gloves at the beginning but if we haven't determined to eliminate our selfish tendencies; all too soon we expect them to fall into line and follow our script

Because selflessness isn't a do it once and forget it thing – it's a mindset that runs counter to our nature and as such it requires constant vigilance and attention

When Paul tells his readers to “do nothing from selfish ambition” that’s somewhat of a “herculean task” because it has to do not only with **what** we do but **why** we do it

In fact, the word “do” that starts **verse 3** isn’t in the original Greek but is supplied by most English translations for clarity

What Paul really means is much stronger than we typically think because what he actually says is more like:

“Don’t even think any thoughts that are motivated by selfish ambition”

And that’s a tall order

When I say, “Don’t think of an elephant” all of you immediately had a picture of a elephant pop into your mind and the only way to get that image out of your mind is to replace it with something else like a vase of flowers

And God is gracious in that he knows that’s how he made us; he knows our limitations, and he never tells us to refrain from a thing without replacing it with something else to focus on instead

And since we know that we can only think about or focus on one thing at a time, Paul doesn’t just tell us to stop being selfish but puts the example of Jesus before us as a pattern for proper behavior

So we see that the cure for an unhealthy obsession with self is sacrificial service – in other words, if you want to stop fixating on whether your needs or preferences are being met, focus on making sure the needs and preferences of others are taken care of

Look with me again at **verses 5-8**

***5**Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6**who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7**but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8**And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Have you ever considered that Jesus is the only human being who ever actually deserved to have everything go his way because as God that is his rightful due?

It’s true – of all the people who have ever lived, Jesus alone would have been right in demanding to be served

But he didn’t cling to his rights as God he chose instead to become like one of his creatures

And even more than that he “took on the form of a servant” as he made himself subservient to those creatures

We see this truth again in **Mark 10:45** where Jesus is teaching his disciples the attitude they should have regarding power:

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The Son condescended to leave his rightful place and become a human and to give up his rights as King of kings to take on the role of a servant during his earthly life and then to even die for his creation

And he didn’t insist on an honorable death but accepted the death of the condemned alongside two thieves

The follower of Jesus Christ must likewise be willing to take up his cross and die to his preferences and his agendas

The life of a true Christ-follower will be characterized by a servant’s attitude where rights and privileges are not demanded or expected but rather are nailed to the cross for the sake of others

The two greatest commandments

The characteristic of selflessness is one of the most important traits a Christ-follower can have

Turn in your Bibles to **Matthew 22** where we will look at **verses 36-40** where we see a lawyer ask Jesus:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Notice that the second greatest commandment and one of two on which the whole of what God requires of his children hangs is to love others as we love ourselves

The truth is, we are incapable of either loving God or our fellow man while insisting on our own way – it can't be done

We must first die to ourselves

And the fact that we are selfish by our very nature means that we will have to do so over and over again

Every time we are tempted to demand our own way we will have to turn our attention back to the example of Jesus and take up the cross of self-sacrifice that God commands us to carry if we want to be his disciples

And God knows that this won't be easy for us

I take great comfort in reading about Jesus' struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane as he wrestled with subordinating his human will to that of his Father

Jesus prayed three times to have the cup of the cross removed from him and he prayed so fervently that he sweat literal drops of blood from the capillaries he burst in the effort

That tells me he knows how hard the struggle is and he isn't asking that we do anything that he hasn't been through

Also, in the two greatest commandments we see that when we put our will above that of our fellows and insist on having our way, we are in reality putting our will above God's

An open church

But the church that has members who successfully set aside their preferences for the sake of others will be an open and inviting church

The church that is selfless in its endeavors will be a church that is outward looking and working to make disciples

And when a church is filled with people looking to yield to one another it will model the statement by the Lord that will know who they follow and serve because of the love they demonstrate toward one another

By that church's actions newcomers will see that they are valued and accepted and they will learn that the way to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ is being modeled in the sacrifices made in the church for the sake of others

And harmony will be the normal order as people strive to avoid the petty disputes that selfishness causes

Conclusion

How we view ourselves has a great impact on how much we are willing to sacrifice

And this goes for all areas of our lives

If we value ourselves highly even the most minor of surrenders will seem monumental in our eyes

The incarnation and death of Christ is the supreme example of sacrifice and surrender of self-service and it must be the model by which a disciple patterns his or her life

Remember, "...whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all"

I've heard it said that the best way to assess whether you truly have the heart of a servant is how you react when you are treated like one

I think you will agree that we need to each ask God to reveal to us any instances of selfishness within our attitudes and ambitions so that we can turn them over to him and replace them with the attitude of sacrifice for the well-being of others

Let's pray