

A Last Word: Dying to self

Facing the giants of sin, shame, Satan and self-interest

Given the fact that man is a fallen creature, born in sin and to sin, we know that his primary interest is virtually always *self-interest*. Even our desire for salvation is primarily the self-interested desire of a fallen creature. No one wants to suffer needlessly. No one wants to live a futile, unfulfilling existence if he can help it. And no one wants to be at odds with his Maker if that means he will experience the endless alienation, hopelessness and pain that ensue. So even when we come to God, it's primarily out of selfishness.

It's the same with virtually everything else we do. As fallen humans, we are naturally going to seek what makes us feel good *and* look good. We are going to pursue those things we believe will make us happy and reduce our pain, even if that happens to be suicide or other forms of self-destructive or self-sabotaging behavior. Other than those who are certifiably insane, we all want what is best for us, or, correction, what we *think* is best for us, whether that is security, safety, power, control, supply, relationship, relief, or any other perceived good. ("No man hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it...") But this is perhaps the fact most difficult to discern, even in our own assessment of ourselves. We don't see ourselves accurately. And we are so good at constructing the fantasy-self we project to the world that hardly anyone else can see our true self either. On those rare occasions when we are found out, when our true self is exposed, we rationalize, justify, explain, excuse, and put the best possible face on everything we are and everything we do, just like Adam did. It's our nature.

But salvation means surrendering all of that self-interest for God's interests. It means dying to self, going to the cross, putting to death the flesh, getting off the throne, repenting, and all those things that are hardest to do. Sanctification is a battle because there is a war going on inside us. Our flesh wars against our spirit, and this is where Pharisaism often gets the upper hand. Pharisaism promotes the comfort, position, power, security and control that the flesh craves.

Once the bait is taken and the leaven of Pharisaism is incorporated, it is almost undetectable in the human heart. We don't see it in ourselves, though we may detect it in others. We see only our pious motives, our godly motives, the ones that we display for public consumption. *Because that's all we want to see.* And we are in almost complete denial about the motives that serve self.

We Christians are all very good at simulating this godly service, calling it altruism, while simultaneously promoting our own self-interest. Disguised as other-centeredness, it comes from

a heart seeking validation, admiration and commendation, or just plain meaning and purpose at the expense of others, even if we don't do them any obvious harm or recognize our true motive. This is what Jesus called hypocrisy. Good on the outside, appealing to the flesh and the mind, but inwardly motivated by personal gain, though hiding that fact from ourselves and others.

Telltale signs that we are wrongly motivated? Seeking or demanding credit for our accomplishments; resentment when we are passed over or not recognized; lording it over others; trying to control the outcome of everything that touches us or reflects on us; questioning God when things don't go our way; entitlement attitudes ("I deserve this!"); compromising the truth for the sake of popularity or safety (man-pleasing); efforts aimed at making a name for ourselves. It manifests more often than not as performance-based spirituality born of an often unrecognized and unacknowledged inferiority complex; a deep-seated self-loathing or self-doubt that compensates by exalting the self. Pride is often just fear masquerading as confidence. Fear of exposure, failure, rejection, inadequacy. Lacking self-worth and blind to our own ignorance, we compensate by striving for positions of influence and power in order to boost our own self-concept and significance.

This is perhaps most offensive in the young 20-something who goes off to seminary thinking he's going to come out and change the world, or at least teach the 60-somethings in his church a thing or two about God and godliness. Sixty year-olds who have fought in wars, worked through perhaps multiple careers, been married, raised children, made mistakes and learned from them, and followed God through the myriad challenges of long life. The arrogance is astounding, so much so that the person seems almost cartoon-like in their oblivion to their own folly. A stunning example of the blind leading the blind. Pride and control, the deadly duo.¹

Pride fuels leaven and leaven fuels pride. It's like a continuous feedback loop. If allowed to keep growing, it will eventually cause the host to collapse in on itself. It is ultimately self-destructive. And its presence prevents supernatural engagement with God. Why? Because pride is the antithesis of childlikeness. And unless we become like little children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

¹ This is not to say that God can't call a young man to be a witness for Him, or gift a young man to preach or do anything else He chooses. But such calls more often than not fall on the man, young or otherwise, who is *reluctant* to preach or be in the limelight rather than on those seeking such adulation, position, or influence. And in any case, it is rare for God to use a young man for leadership among his elders -- although it *has* happened. He can use a donkey if He has to. But recall that Timothy, though young, was not young in faith. He was schooled at his mother and grandmother's knees and later by Paul himself. Too often we sanction the new, untaught believer to immediately enter Bible school and prepare for ministry, when in fact he is still a mission-field with much to learn via God's experiential schooling and rarely fit to school others in godliness or maturity. David was young and handpicked by God to lead Israel, but he was also humble, and also made critical and gross errors. His case does not justify the routine promotion of young men to leadership.

Not only does the leaven of pride prevent true intimacy with God, it does the same on the horizontal level, blocking us from transparent, genuine relationships with our brothers and sisters. It forces us to wear masks and to put up walls. It makes us unknowable.

The real job of a pastor or elder then is to help people become like children before God:² humble, contrite, transparent, teachable, trusting, so that they can enter the Kingdom. Childlikeness is a prerequisite to learning to hear God's voice, to walking in and being filled with the Spirit. Once I know how to hear God's voice and walk in the Spirit, I can be set free to follow the Spirit in my daily life.³ Pastor/teachers can help us learn these fundamentals if they grasp them themselves. Their goal should be to work themselves out of a job with each disciple. But for so many in leadership, pastoring means conveying information and knowledge, doctrine and theology. They don't realize that knowledge puffs up unless it comes to a childlike heart. We've got the cart before the horse, just like they did in first-century Judaism.

We live in a religious context that doesn't distinguish between true spirituality and religiosity very well, and so did the Pharisees. And to make matters worse, we are all naturally a little dense. We see with half-converted eyes. Most of us have bits of unsundered leaven in our lump and the devil makes a valiant effort to make sure we never see it, lest we evict it (and him) from our hearts.

The spiritual forces of Pharisaism are as deeply entrenched in our culture and thinking as they were in Jesus' day, and as they are in modern rabbinic Judaism. They are widely accepted, even lauded. Performance-based spirituality is often the only kind the Church seems to recognize. Not only do we recognize it, we justify it and think it's entitled to the same kind of professional status as any other worldly endeavor.

The danger, then, of taking a regular salary for work in the Church, like employees of any other enterprise, cannot be over-emphasized. It is a defining mark of a hireling (along with not being concerned about the sheep) and compromise virtually always results. Keeping the money flowing becomes primary. At the same time, Jesus said that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel. It is not wrong therefore, for those in evangelistic or other ministries to accept financial gifts, but we believe official salaries are not what Jesus had in mind. Salaried professionals in the Church automatically establish a class structure that is contrary to Jesus' teaching.

² And of course you can't teach what you don't already know and hopefully do.

³ 1 John 2:27: "And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need of any one to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in Him."

Christian service is a walk of faith, moment by moment, day by day, learning to be anxious for nothing, trusting that God will provide for the work that He commissions. That does not mean those in His service will not suffer. On the contrary. They are almost guaranteed to suffer, at least rejection and persecution if not privation. Paul surely did. The apostles did. Why should it be any different for us? The fact is, none of us *wants* to suffer and that gets us back to the main thrust of this last section: self-interest. Our point? We need to die to self-interest if we want to be true shepherds.

The bottom line is, did Jesus intend His Church to look like the synagogue system of His day, with titled and salaried professionals in charge (whom He regularly excoriated), preaching from prepared texts and living lives insulated from the trials and tribulations of life in the real world?⁴ Yet we have sanctioned an entire elite class that is not required (or expected) to work and yet is entitled to a tithe of all we earn just like the Levitical priests, even though the priesthood has been done away. This notion that certain superior individuals are uniquely called to exercise their gifts, natural or otherwise, 24/7 while others labor to enable them to do so flies in the face of all Jesus and Paul taught. Other than itinerant, traveling missionaries or evangelists, many of whom cannot legally work in their mission field, all of us are responsible for the needs of our own families, and though we can accept gifts given voluntarily as the Spirit leads, we should not accept set salaries for our spiritual contributions within the Body of Christ. This promotes elitism in the churches and sabotages true brotherhood. And, along with required credentials and academic indoctrination, it has brought the Church into line with the synagogue system of Jesus' day. This should not be. The Church is a composite of spiritual gifts working together in harmony, and should not be impeded or quenched by business interests or policies. Jesus gave His Church a new commandment, that we should love one another the way He loved us and dwell together in unity, operating under the power of the Holy Spirit and using our gifts as the Spirit leads. Pharisaism sabotages this objective by causing competition, division and elitism, quenching the Spirit and cooperating with selfish ambition and self-interest.

Our hope is that this study will cause us all to take a more objective look at where we are in the overall scheme of things and ultimately be motivated to take whatever action is necessary to get ourselves and our lives aligned with Jesus' perspective. Thank you for persevering through this document. We hope it has blessed you.

⁴ Paul admonished those who were doing no work at all to follow his example.