

SELFISHNESS--A BASIC SIN

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 17, 1954 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.” (Matt. 16:24-25). These are words of Jesus, words in which he points out that man must renounce himself in order to be his full and complete disciple. Notice particularly the expression “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself. The denial of self is one of man’s most difficult problems.

Little Barbarians

All of us are aware, as we observe our children, that one of their biggest problems is the problem of learning to be unselfish. A few years ago I heard Dr. Provine, who was then President of Ward-Belmont College, describe his own two daughters, who I doubt not were well behaved children, as two barbarians. When we laughed at his description he explained that when they came into the world they were completely egocentric, having no concern for anyone but themselves. As all children do, they grabbed this, they grabbed that, they wanted this, they wanted that. He was simply describing children as they are before we tame them or teach them that others also have rights. We are all aware that children are selfish.

In our Bible classes here at the church we are interested in telling our youngsters the stories of both Old and New Testaments. We want them to learn the names of the books of the Bible. We want them to memorize certain passages of scripture. But we are primarily concerned with teaching these youngsters certain basic attitudes and habits of living. One of those basic attitudes is the habit of sharing and of considering others as well as themselves. We use the material that God has given us in the Bible to achieve the goals of behavior which God desires. We are trying to change our behavior and make it into the kind of living that Christ would claim as his own.

Adults, Too

The tragic fact is that selfishness is not exclusively the problem of children. It goes with us as long as we live. In fact, I wonder if it doesn’t become more dangerous as we grow older, for we adults learn to cover it up. We are not quite so obviously selfish, for we do not go about pushing each other physically, but there are grounds for wondering if we adults aren’t even more deeply selfish than our children. According to Webster, selfishness is “caring unduly or supremely for oneself, regarding one’s own comforts or advantage in disregard or at the expense of others.” When you define it so is there any one of us who wouldn’t agree that we still have a long way to go in overcoming selfishness.

I have the feeling that when I mention that I am going to speak on a theme like selfishness that the first reaction may be: “That’s a rather trivial theme.” Subjects like politeness, promptness, cleanliness and such like are important, but hardly suitable for subjects for sermons. Selfishness, however, is basic. In fact, I would say it is one of the most serious sins that a man can commit. Listen to the text again, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.”

Examples of Selfishness

Notice a few examples along our theme. Think of a boy and a girl over in college somewhere. They come from homes like the ones represented here. They are well fed and well clothed. They have good houses. They drive their family cars. They fall in love. After a little while their love for each other has grown to the point where they get married. Then, problems begin to arise. The boy must get out and earn a living. It is hard for him to earn a living that is comparable to the living that their fathers have earned. With his smaller income it is impossible for them to go on enjoying the things they have learned to take for granted. Some things have to be given up. It becomes a question of whether he can go on a fishing trip or whether she can have a new hat. It is one or the other and it may be a pretty difficult decision, for you can see how obviously it is tied up with selfishness.

On her side of the problem, the work that mother used to do now falls to her. She must scrub the apartment, she must get up and prepare the meals, she must do this and that and the other. Each of these young people discovers that marriage involves certain sacrifices. As the pressures mount the home breaks up. The boy isn’t mature enough to shoulder the responsibility of being a husband. The girl isn’t mature enough to shoulder the responsibility of being a wife. What is the problem? Immaturity. That is just another way of saying too much concern for one’s own self.

Selfishness in Business

Look with me now at another situation. Selfishness sometimes plagues business organizations. Here is the head of one department who doesn't like the head of another department. When you trace their antagonism back a few years, feelings were once quite different. Then came the time when one crossed the other and blocked something that he wanted. Growing out of that have come hard feelings. It is an unusual organization involving very many people that does not have these cross currents of ill will. They, too, are results of selfishness.

Greed is a sin of selfishness. It is a result of an inordinate desire to care for ourselves even above others. Most of the crimes that are committed have in them at least some selfish motive power. That obviously would be true of stealing or robbery. Such sins as envy, jealousy, and hatred, likewise, can easily be classified as selfish sins. Most of the sins we commit have somewhere down deep underneath too great a concern for ourselves and too little concern for others.

### The Ten Commandments

Perhaps the most effective way to point out the depth of this problem is to remind you that six of the ten commandments are directed primarily against sins of selfishness. Look at them for a moment with me. Commandment number five in the list is "Honor thy father and thy mother." This commandment primarily emphasizes the fact that young people are prone to think too much of themselves and their own judgments and too little of their parents. Commandment number six is "Thou shalt not kill." Killing is simply disregarding the basic right of someone else to life itself. By what stretch of the imagination can one man have the right to tell another that he can no longer live? "Thou shalt not commit adultery" is commandment number seven. Committing adultery is a sin not only against God but against the other person. It is a willingness to degrade another person in order to gratify one's own physical lust. It is obviously an act of selfishness. "Thou shalt not steal" is the next command. Obviously stealing is a selfish disregard of the right of someone else concerning property. The ninth commandment is "Thou shalt not bear false witness," which again is selfish. It means a willingness to lie against another man to suit one's own purposes. The last in the list of the ten commandments is "Thou shalt not covet," which means to have an inordinate desire for what belongs to another. Six of the ten commandments are really commandments against selfishness.

### Solomon's Self-centeredness

Throughout the Old Testament and the New there are teachings against selfishness. The classic example of the Old Testament is the story of Solomon. Notice the pronouns and how he emphasizes the I, the me, and the mine: "I made me great works: I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit: I made me pools of water, to water therefrom the forests where trees were reared; I bought men-servants and maid-servants, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of herds and flocks above all that were before me in Jerusalem; I gathered me also silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I gat me men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced because of all my labor; and this was my portion from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do; and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun." (Eccles. 2:4-11). This is Solomon's own testimony that a self-centered life does not pay off in happiness and satisfaction.

### A Rich Young Ruler

In the teachings of Christ we come to the very root of this matter of selfishness. Let me mention to you a few of the examples of whom Jesus speaks. First, there is the story of the rich young ruler: "And as he was going forth into the way, there ran one to him, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me, good? none is good save one, even God. Thou knowest the commandments, Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor thy father and mother. Teacher, all these things have I observed from my youth. And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shall have treasure in heaven: and come follow me. But his countenance fell at the saying, and he went away sorrowful: for he was one that had great possessions." (Mark 10:17-22). He loved his material possessions more than he loved the possibility of being eternally saved. That is self-centeredness of a kind which is very common in our world.

Here is another familiar story which is a clear-cut example of selfishness: "The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he reasoned within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry. But God said unto him, Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21).

### Even Among the Apostles

Even among the apostles there is that revealing incident in which Jesus and the disciples were walking along when he perceived that they were discussing which of them would be the greatest. He turned and taught them a lesson of humility. Another incident of similar nature is the story involving the mother of James and John. She came to Jesus to ask: "Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom." (Matt. 20:2-1). Jesus told her these positions were not his to give. Later in that story you read, "And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren." (Matt. 20:24). Their mother's selfish desire for their exaltation stirred up animosity among the ten. Again Jesus had to teach them the value Of humility, He did so by saying "Whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister, and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant.: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:26-28).

The apostle Paul wrote using the expression: "In honor preferring one another." (Rom. 12:10). Unselfishness is also clearly taught in the great golden rule of Christ: "All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. 7: 12)

#### Christ's Perfect Antidote

Christ not only taught against selfishness, he gave a perfect antidote for it. That antidote is love. The center of Christ's teachings is love. Jesus commanded it often. He taught it clearly and distinctly, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this all men know that ye are my disciples if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34-35). He also said, "Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you." (Matt. 5:44). A few moments ago I mentioned a young couple whose house was broken by selfishness. Jesus even foresaw such a possibility as that and guided Paul to say, "Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies." (Eph. 5:28). How much does a man love his body? Enough that he feeds it, enough that he cares for it, enough that he protects it every way he knows how. To that very great degree every Christian husband is to love his own wife. And of course what is commanded of the husband is also commanded of the wife. Many of us would be better husbands, better wives if we could only see selfishness for what it is.

#### The World's Way vs. Christ's Way

Selfishness is the way of the world, and stands in bold contrast to the way of Christ. The world's way is dog eat dog, the strong overpower the weak. Christ taught his disciples to turn the other cheek. He was willing to be crucified rather than destroy his enemies even though he could have called twelve legions of angels to do so. It wasn't Christ's way. Look at those people who crucified him. Look at his enemies. They selfishly killed him to get him out of their way. For the moment they won the battle, but it was only for the moment. As the centuries have come and gone it has become ever more obvious that Christ really won the hearts of the people. His is the permanent victory. Selfishness never makes friends. Selfishness never brings happiness. When Jesus came into the world unselfishly to give himself for man he was demonstrating that the best way is the selfless way of serving others. In honor prefer one another. Love one another. Christ still demands, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it."