

The Bondage of Self-Obsession

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Christ-Centered Dnow / Self-Denial

Introduction

Views of Self-Esteem

When somebody has a serious problem, or has committed some crime, our culture's response has always been to consider their self-esteem. However, the way in which we view their self-esteem has changed overtime. Today, we have a **modern view of self-esteem**. When we see someone who let's say is abusive, modern psychology would say he has too low of a self-esteem. He doesn't view himself in a positive light. Poor fellow just doesn't like himself and so he goes after his family. However, there used to be a different view; we'll call it the **traditional view**. The view of someone who is abusive is that his self-esteem was too high! He thinks too highly of himself and he lets that lead him to do whatever he wanted.

In viewing self-esteem the modern way, we make everyone a victim. You're never at fault because you are struggling with not liking yourself. And the medicine to one with low

self-esteem is to prop him up. Tell him how great he is. Tell yourself how great you are. Puff up more and more! But there is a serious problem with the modern view of self-esteem: it is only making things worse.

The ego is something that you cannot ever satisfy. The more you fill it, the hungrier it gets. Tim Keller calls it an **insatiable... black hole**. See, your ego is broken. It leads you to be constantly comparing yourself to others, therefore mentally putting down those around you. How else can we keep our self-esteem up than comparison? If I want to lift myself up in my mind, I can just tear down others. This is an endless, miserable game. We don't just want to be the best, we want to be *viewed* as the best.

Look what Madonna said of her career:

My drive in life comes from a fear of being mediocre. That is always pushing me. I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being but then I am still mediocre and uninteresting unless I do something else. Because even though I have become somebody, I still have to prove that I am somebody. My struggle has never ended and I guess it never will.

Madonna had a profound sense of herself. I believe she struggled with the same thing all of us do. See she seemingly had everything and yet, she felt like she had to prove herself everyday. We are doing the same thing.

This problem of ego and self-obsession is not just a worldly idea, it is a biblical one too. Look for it as you read and study Scripture and you will see sinners feeding their ego and being self-obsessed from the very beginning! However, today we are going to look at a familiar church to us: the church of Corinth.

Corinthian Catastrophe

Self-Obsession in Corinth

The early church struggled with this too! Namely, the church in Corinth. The Corinthian church was quite a mess. Having so many great leaders poured into the members of this church, they all became very haughty. They would boast about who baptized them. They split into factions based on this. They would even boast in themselves and the amount of spiritual gifts they had. And so there was a great desire to have more and more gifts! This pride was leading them to devour one another and ignore rotting, festering sin in their church. This pride led to great disorder during service of everyone trying to preach and teach and pray and speak in tongues all at once. It was an absolute mess, all rooted in pride.

Paul wrote many letters to this church, but we only have

two. Much of Paul's writings to the Corinthians is addressing their pride. Consider this and read through both letters. It is glaring.

There are actually several examples of Paul speaking against their pride in 1 Corinthians, but we don't have time to read them all.

Instead, I want to dig more into this by looking at a specific passage in 1 Corinthians. That is 3:21-4:7. In this passage, we see Paul model, rather than self-obsession, self-forgetfulness. This passage is in the middle of Paul addressing their pride especially in their church leaders. Let's see what we can learn from him and his words to this church.

Paul's Self-Forgetfulness

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 3

21 So let no one boast in human leaders, for everything is yours—22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come—everything is yours, 23 and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

THE FAITHFUL MANAGER

4 A person should think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God. 2 In this regard, it is required that managers be found faithful. 3 It is

of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I don't even judge myself. 4 For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 So don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God.

THE APOSTLES' EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY

6 Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying: "Nothing beyond what is written." The purpose is that none of you will be arrogant, favoring one person over another. 7 For who makes you so superior? What do you have that you didn't receive? If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn't received it?

Leveling the Field

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 3

21 So let no one boast in human leaders, for everything is yours—22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come—everything is yours, 23 and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Once again, the Corinthians took pride in everything they

could. One of those things was their leader, or who disciplined them or baptized them. Paul addresses this first earlier on in the letter:

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 1

12 What I am saying is this: One of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul’s name?

Their thought process was “what can I claim to make me greater than those around me?” Remember, this was the attitude of their culture all-around. We discussed in the intro to 1 Corinthians that their society was an aspirational one. Everyone was climbing the social ladder by whatever means necessary. They sought to be the most flamboyantly wealthy in the room. This doesn’t mesh well with Christianity.

So Paul commands them that no one should **boast in human leaders**. This activity shouldn’t exist amongst believers. It is purely pride and completely unnecessary. Paul says something interesting next: **for everything is yours—whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come—everything is yours, and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.**

He is leveling the playing field. In a society that was

comparing and one upping one another, he says to these believers” everything is yours.” The word for “yours” is plural, so he is actually saying “Everything is y’all’s.” This is really important! Their boasting is completely foolish because Paul, Apollos, and Cephas are all of their leaders. He goes further and says that all things belong to them. Do you see what Paul is doing? He is unifying them by showing they have in common all things, not some over others, but all of them.

But then, Paul also humbles them at the same time: **and you (or yall) BELONG to Christ**. To a prideful person, belonging to somebody is like a stab in the side. Our individualistic society would say “I belong to no one, I am my own man/woman!” But Paul says we belong to Jesus. Ultimately, this is where the weekend is going to land in being Christ-centered rather than us centered, but I won’t go there yet.

The Apostles’ Humility

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 4

A person should think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God.

Shifting gears, Paul, as an example to the Corinthians, speaks of himself and the other church leaders (Apollos, Cephas, etc.). He calls themselves **servants of Christ and**

managers of the mysteries of God. Notice that he is showing them that they are not excluded from this lowly demeanor. The Apostles, who of anyone have right to claim superiority and boast, call themselves as servants or underlings to Jesus. Even as leaders, they are not seeking the highest position to outdo one another, rather they are to be humble servants of Jesus and of one another.

This is true for our leaders today as well. Remember the way Jesus led: as a servant. He didn't count equality with God as something to be grasped, but rather He emptied Himself, assuming the form of a servant (Phil 2). He washed the feet of the disciples. He lived pouring out for everyone around Him, day by day. And His death, of course, was purely selfless for humanity. Jesus was a Servant-Leader. Paul and the Apostles sought to imitate that. We should as well in our leadership. Remember, your leader is serving you.

Faithful over Popular

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 4

2 In this regard, it is required that managers be found faithful.

He says that the requirement, what matters for him as a manger is what? Faithfulness. Faithfulness in stewarding what God has given him. Faithfulness is shepherding the souls he has been entrusted with. That is his barometer for

success; nothing else.

What else do we often use to measure our success? Others approval of us. How do I know I did this right? Well, did people like it? Were you complimented? Were you rewarded or recognized? Paul saw this temptation and he is speaking out against it directly. Look what he says:

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 4

3 It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I don't even judge myself. 4 For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me.

Paul says that he does not care what this church thinks of him. Furthermore, Paul does not care what any human court thinks of him. And even further, Paul doesn't even care what he thinks of him. This is groundbreaking and completely counter-cultural.

As a leader, you will inevitably be critiqued by your followers. Rather than trust you, they look at you and say "Wow, I would never do that." They can be ungracious in your failures. They always assume to know more. The Corinthians had this problem with Paul. In reading 2 Corinthians, you can see Paul over and over has to assert himself as an authority over them because some were disregarding it. They attacked his preaching for not being great. They claimed he was only strong behind his writing

but weak in person. These were not gracious people. Yes, Paul wants them to submit to authority and so he would address that, but he doesn't see their disrespect as a sign he has failed. He doesn't care.

We, so often, get entangled in how we are viewed by others. We let it control everything we do and say. Many, in turn, change everything about themselves based on how others view them. What if we could genuinely say as Paul says: "It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by anyone." What if our barometer for success in life was simply faithfulness?

Notice that Paul says that he doesn't even judge himself. What does this mean? Just as he doesn't care about others think of him, he also isn't always thinking about himself. We so do this. We spend forever thinking about what others think of us and what we think of us, but Paul says he doesn't care about either. This is Paul practicing self-forgetfulness.

Self-forgetfulness, self-denial, is not the same thing as self-hatred. Paul didn't say "I hate myself," but "I don't judge myself." This means when Paul messes up, he doesn't dog himself for it, he simply repents and moves forward. He doesn't spend hours a day analyzing himself for his intentions and how he looks and what he is wearing and how he sounded when he said x y z; no. He just does what seems faithful and moves forward. When

he messes up, he confesses, repents, and he moves forward. He doesn't let his sin define who he is.

There truly is a freedom in self-forgetfulness because there is a burden in self-obsession.

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 4

4 For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me.

Some may interpret Paul to be saying “Only God can judge me,” in the way that people say it today, dodging accountability. Paul didn't dodge accountability. Instead, he was walking so in-step with the Spirit, that he was truly aware of his sin when it came. He was immensely convicted in it. So He can say with a clear conscience, “I'm not conscious of anything against myself.”

His view of himself was extremely sober. He wasn't obsessed with him. He wasn't obsessed with others view of him. He wasn't always trying to inflate his ego more and more. His barometer was faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 4

5 So don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God.

We want to have it all figured out now. This thing I did was good, this thing I did was bad. I don't know why I did this thing. Paul says you're judging prematurely. It isn't your job to determine these things.

Caveat: this does not discount accountability and community. Yes, your brothers and sisters in Christ have a duty to tell you when you're doing something wrong in a gentle, loving manner. This is referring to one who is ruled by the fear of man.

Ultimately, in the end, the Lord knows the intentions of the heart. He knows why everyone does what they're doing. These things will be brought to the light.

Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline* (page 101) points out this

The tongue is our most powerful weapon of manipulation. A frantic stream of words flows from us because we are in a constant process of adjusting our public image. We fear so deeply what we think other people see in us that we talk in order to straighten out their understanding. If I have done some wrong thing (or even some right thing that I thin you may misunderstand) and discover that you know about it, I will be very tempted to help you understand my action. Silence is one of the deepest Disciplines of the Spirit simply because it puts the stopper on all self-justification. One of the

fruits of silence is the freedom to let God be our justifier. We don't need to straighten others out.

Do you see this in yourself? This frantic need to justify everything you do and help others see you in a better light than perhaps they do? Why don't you stop talking and let God justify you? Let the Spirit work in others' hearts and if they need a better view of you, let God take care of that. It isn't your job. For the Lord **will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts.**

Conclusion

I want you to go from one of these Corinthians trying to one up everyone around them and justify themselves and prove to be viewed as the greatest to being like Paul in forgetting himself and striving only for faithfulness; not caring what others say about him because his standard is faithfulness to Jesus; letting God be his justifier when he has been wrongly perceived and not feeling the need to prove himself to everyone around him. I want this to be your reality.

Because in being self-forgetful and Christ-centered, you will find an immense freedom. You'll find a great weight lifted off your back as you no longer have to live like Madonna, always trying to prove yourself, but you can just pursue and

love Jesus and let Him be your identity and your everything.

This freedom only exists in Jesus Christ. If you have still rejected Him, then you will find only more burdens and suffering in your life. You won't experience freedom. You'll continue to live under slavery. Put your faith in Jesus and experience true freedom through the Spirit's work in your heart.

Christian Standard Bible Chapter 2

20 I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Let your old self be crucified with Jesus and die so that the only life that is in you now is Jesus Christ.