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ALWAYS PUT OTHERS FIRST – NOT! Michael B. Beaugh
Luke 18:9-14; II Corinthians 1:3-4 September 6, 2009
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Has anyone ever said to you, “You need to stop thinking about yourself and start thinking of others”? Or maybe you have thought it about someone else, or said it to someone else. I know every parent has said it at least once to a teenager. “It’s not all about you, you know!”

Actually, the church may be the place you hear this most often.

Doesn’t the Bible say it is better to give than to receive? Jesus tells us to deny ourselves and take up a cross and follow him (Mark 8:34). After all, Jesus emptied himself and became a servant (Philippians 2:7), and so should we. Self-sacrifice, that’s the ticket to a happy life, right? To a godly life.

Then we translate this to our practical needs. If you are having problems in your marriage, parenting, or addictions, you might go to a friend or a counselor who tells you to stop thinking about your problems. Do something for someone else. The implication is that the problem is your self-centeredness. If you are depressed and having pity-parties all the time, it is because you are self-centered. Jesus offers the solution – always put others first - self-sacrifice.

So we decide to try it. We hear a stirring call to sacrifice and go home with a new resolve. Couldn’t do anything but help, right? “From now on I am going to be the most thoughtful and considerate husband who ever existed. Others first, that’s my motto! After the evening meal, you say, ‘Honey, let me clean the kitchen tonight.’ She’s surprised and pleased. You have never done this before. You goes off and leaves you with it. Second night: ‘Honey, while you put the dishes in the dish washer, let me clear the table for you.’ This is still unusual. She is happy to see the change in you. Third night: ‘Honey, I’ll go get the television ready for our favorite program. I’ll wait for you.’ Now she sees a pattern. Not good. Fourth night: You get up from the table without saying a word. You go plop down in front of the television and yell, ‘Aren’t you through in there yet? The program is starting.’”

Ah, yes. Self-sacrifice. Why do we believe it is the answer from God and yet find it so hard to do?

Let me be clear about this. The Bible does say that disciples of Jesus make it a practice of putting others first, but – and this is a big but - **always putting others first is neither healthy nor biblical.** Christian psychologists Henry Cloud and John Townsend call it a crazy maker. It can make matters worse instead of better. It can increase guilt instead of relieving it. It can become nothing more than an avoidance of the hard work we need to do in ourselves. **Healthy sacrificial living is not even possible**

until we get our own deepest needs met first. To do that, we have to admit we have needs and then ask for help.

That was the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable Jesus told. The Pharisee was a religious man devoted to God. He came to the temple one to pray. He stood up so everyone could see him. He prayed loudly so everyone could hear him. His prayer was a boast about the things he had accomplished. But notice that Jesus says very pointedly that he was "standing by himself." In other words, he was a lonely man.

I would say he was a typical man. Even in his prayer, he acted like he had no needs. He had it all together. He didn't need any help. He wasn't about to ask for help, not even God's help. It's the thing that gets engrained in a lot of us men. It starts when we are boys. We learn that to be a real man means you do it yourself. To admit a need is to admit a weakness. We take all the credit when things go well, and we blame ourselves when things don't go well, but don't ask us to ask for help.

One of the loneliest men I ever knew was a self-made millionaire. He hob-knobbed with the politicians who made the news in Texas and across the country. To be around him was insufferable. The only thing he talked about – the only thing – were his accomplishments, his influence on the politicians, the circles he ran in. He loved telling me how much money he gave to various causes and how many big deals he had going. Like the Pharisee, he was a boastful man and from all outward appearances very successful.

But his wife knew him differently. She was a wonderful God-centered woman and member of my church. Her husband had a drinking problem, which he denied. He had other women on the side, which he denied. She tried everything she knew to reach her husband. She even went to Al Anon meetings. The most telling thing she ever said to me and that caused her the deepest anguish was this, "He just doesn't need me."

Do you know the scary thing about this story? Although I really disliked this man, I have some of the same characteristics. Not the boasting, not the wine, women, and wealth. The Lord has saved me from these. But the denial of needs. It has always been hard for me to admit my needs and ask for help. And that is deadly.

Look at the Pharisee. He was smug and self-righteous. He was judgmental. No wonder he was a lonely man.

The tax collector, on the other hand, comes into the temple to pray. Instead of standing and spreading his feathers like a proud peacock, he falls on his knees before God and prays for help. Jesus says the tax collector was justified before God.

Let me tell you what that means. **The tax collector looked inside himself. He put himself first but in a healthy way.** He looked into his own soul and admitted his need to God. By doing so, he made a place for God. By kneeling, he admitted his needs to those who saw him. This was a man God could use. This was a man who was on his way to becoming the kind of disciple God wants us to be.

This parable shows us that the Bible values our needs. Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are those who have their act together." In the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Here is what the Bible says about us. **The Bible says God created each one of us with needs. There is an incompleteness in us. The only way to get those needs met is by admitting them and then asking for help from others.** Neglecting or denying our needs will lead to emotional and spiritual problems.

What are some of these needs? The list could be long. Let me suggest five needs that I believe are universal. Each of us needs acceptance, approval, forgiveness, friendship, and security. Unless these needs are being met, we cannot put others first in a healthy way.

In II Corinthians 1:3-4, the Apostle Paul recognizes the relationship between having needs met and being able to meet other's needs. Paraphrased, he says that since God has consoled us, we can console others. Since God has loved us, we can love others. Since God has forgiven us, we can forgive others.

Now here is where I am going with this.

Some of us may have such an emotional block that it will take professional help to get us on the path to emotional and spiritual health. There is no shame in that. It is just reality. Some of us don't have a chance because of what we experienced growing up.

It has always been interesting to me that so many of us join a church because of some felt need and then spend the next forty years pretending everything is okay. Don't ask me to share my life with others! **I get the feeling that our message of self-sacrifice above all else is a conspiracy of cover up.** Let's agree to be busy helping others so we don't have to face our own needs. Or let me do my own thing my own way. These are the masks we put on, and it may take a professional to help us remove the masks.

If that's you and if what I am about to say next doesn't do it for you, then talk to me in private and I will recommend a therapist who is Christian and believes that his job is to work himself out of a job. "Oh, but isn't it

selfish to do all this navel gazing?" On the contrary, it is selfish if we don't find a way to recognize, admit, and seek help from others to meet our needs.

Getting professional help I call Plan B. God didn't start out sending professional therapists into the world. Instead, God created the church. I call this God's Plan A.

I get tired of people asking me why they have to go to church. I have never said you have to go to church. Besides, church is not something we go to. It is who we are. We are the church. Here is something you parents can say to your children when they complain about "having to go to church." **The church is the community of people God draws together for the meeting of needs.** God gives us each other because it is God's way of giving us trusted others to help meet the deepest needs in our lives. When you joined this church, this congregation, you made a covenant with God and with all of us. You promised that we could trust you to be here for us. And we promised that we would be here for you without prejudice or judgment.

When you absent yourself from us, two things happen. You withhold from us your God-given capacity to meet our needs, and you miss your God-given opportunity to have your needs met by us. You break your promise and all are diminished by that.

Church is not a "have to"; it is a privilege granted by God. It is the place where we are actually encouraged to put ourselves first in a healthy way so we can become the kind of human being God intends us to be.

Look, if you don't think you need professional help, let me recommend getting into one of our Growth Groups here at SBPC. No one will analyze you or make you say stuff you don't want to say, but I can guarantee that if you participate with an open and expectant heart, God will bless you. And God will use you to bless others.

Ask yourself, "Am I asking for what I need? Am I able to admit that I can't do it by myself?" Our heavenly Father welcomes and justifies all who come to Him in need, and through the church, he ministers to the deepest needs of our hearts.

Please don't always put others first.