

Other people centeredness

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[0 : 00] We are all naturally selfish creatures, aren't we? I don't think anybody could deny that. I think that's just a given.

In fact, when I studied economics at university, one of the fundamental assumptions in modern economic theory is that every member of society will act according to their own self-interest. That's how the economy functions. It's a given in economic theory and social theory that everybody will be selfish, and that's how the world works. It could be said that even those who give to charity and do seemingly good works in society are still, at the end of the day, doing those things for selfish reasons, to increase their sense of value in society or to reduce their guilt in having more than someone else.

I think more often than not, that's why we give two round to the guy at the robots, often just to decrease our own guilt for having more than him. You see, instinctively, it could be said that everything we do, we actually do for ourselves.

And this principle carries over into our relationships as well, even when we don't notice it. The people that we choose to spend time with, the partners that we choose to marry, will typically be those who benefit us in some way, won't they?

[1 : 16] Those people who increase our happiness are the people that we're more likely to spend time with. And we tend to avoid the people who decrease our enjoyment. Those people who constantly have problems.

You know those people. Or those people who are just a burden to be around. Now, it's this self-interested instinct that we all have which makes an instruction like that in Romans 15.1 really difficult.

Just before we read it, the context is that Paul has been talking in chapter 14 about a situation in the Roman church, which we looked at a couple of weeks ago. And he's been instructing the Christians there on how they should treat each other, how they should get along.

But it's here in chapter 15 that he then expands that specific Roman situation to a general principle that applies to all Christians everywhere, in every context. In how we're meant to deal with people that we don't necessarily agree with or people that we don't necessarily get on with.

And he says this. Look at verse 1. He says, We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good to build them up.

[2 : 29] Now, we're reminded here that God, in His Word, calls Christians to go against the grain, pretty much. To have the... We're reminded in this verse, in verse 1, to have the opposite instincts of the world around us.

You see that? We're reminded to do completely what is natural to us. So while the world around us is run on self-interest, Christians are called to be the people who do the opposite.

Christians are called the people whose instinct it is to seek the interests of others before themselves. That is, if you like, a mark of God's kingdom. Now, I don't know about you, but that seems an almost impossible task to me, doesn't it?

I mean, if we had to be honest with ourselves, the way that we're wired, it seems to go the opposite of our natural instinct. And so how can we possibly do it? It is such a difficult task that, you know, it's one of these things that we seem to read over in our Bible, skip over, and go to the more easy things to obey.

Is it realistic to actually expect that we can be people like that? Is it realistic to expect that St. Mark's can be a group of people who instinctively seek the good of one another before themselves?

[3 : 47] Imagine if it was. Imagine we were like that, instinctively. That would be amazing. And so let me ask you this morning, do you want to be part of a community like that? Do you want to be a person like that?

Do you want to be an other person-centered person? Ask yourself. Well, if that's the case, if you do want to be that kind of person, then it's vital that we listen to what Paul goes on to write.

Because it's here that he gives us three major motivations for you and I to be that type of person.

Not just motivations, but he explains how we can be.

And with these motivations, and with the inner working of the Holy Spirit in us, we can become the type of people God is calling us to be. And so let's look at them. Have a look at verse 2. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up.

For even Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me. Even Jesus, even Christ, did not please himself.

[4 : 52] Just think about that for a second. All right? The one person who had every right to please himself, because after all, the universe was made for him. The one person who had every right to please himself, even he was always other person centered.

That's what Paul wants to remind us here. And we see this in the gospel accounts, don't we? When we read the gospel, we see that Jesus always was seeking the good of others.

He was always looking out for the best interests of others, not himself. And ultimately, we learn the very reason he came to earth was to suffer and die for the sake of others.

The sake of other people. First and foremost, he came to earth and did that and went through that for the glory of his heavenly father. And verse 3 here, Paul quotes from an Old Testament passage, a psalm, which foreshadows Christ and what he would go through.

And in it, we learn that Jesus came to bear the insults of his father, God. You know, when he quotes this verse here in verse 3, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

[5 : 59] He's not talking about us and the insults of people who insult us. He's talking about God. He's addressing his heavenly father. He's saying to his father, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

In other words, what he's saying there is that all the hostility and rebellion of man that was directed on God was going to fall on Jesus. And we saw this in the gospel, don't we?

Everyone, even his closest friends, they eventually abandoned him and the whole world conspires to kill him. Even sworn enemies, you know, even the Jews and the Romans who hated each other, even they worked together to snuff out God, to snuff out Jesus.

So Jesus came to bear the hostility of man towards God on behalf of his father. All the time he was thinking about the glory of his father above himself. Even in, you know, Gethsemane, the night before he was crucified, he prays to God.

He's in agony, very much like David writes in the song. He's in agony and he prays to God, let this cup pass from me. You know, he prays, please let me not go through this.

[7 : 12] And yet, he ends, but not my will, but yours be done. He was always seeking for the will and for the desire of his father, not himself. He came to bear the hostility of man towards God.

But he also came, not just for his father, he also came for you and me to also bear the hostility of God towards man. You see, when he died on the cross, not only was the world's hostility towards God focused on him at that point, but God's righteous anger for all that hostility, God's holy justice, instead of falling on the people who were killing and torturing his son, was falling on and focused on Jesus himself.

And so, just for a second, try to grasp what Jesus was going through on the cross. Try to understand it. He was abandoned by people as they mocked and insulted him, and he was abandoned by his heavenly father as he took the punishment for the sins of others.

He was at that moment the most lonely person in the universe. And the amazing thing is that he did that all willingly and on purpose.

He went into it knowing what was going to happen. Why would he do that? Why would he go into that? Well, because the only reason was because he wasn't thinking about himself, but he was thinking about the glory of his father and he was thinking about the salvation of people.

[8 : 39] his wants weren't even in the picture. And it's only because they weren't that you and I can have any hope of being saved from sin. Let's not take salvation for granted.

Let's not take the fact that God has opened the way to eternal life for granted. Because if Jesus had given any thought to what he wanted, which he had every right to do, he would never have gone through what he went through to save us.

And that means that if you're a Christian this morning, the only reason that you are saved, the only reason that you can have the hope of eternal life and you need not fear the terrors and the justice of hell, the only reason is because Jesus decided to put you ahead of himself.

Just let that sink in for a second. The only reason that you can have any hope of eternity is because Jesus decided to put you ahead of himself.

because Jesus was other person centered. And when you get that, when you get that your eternal life is secure only because someone else put you ahead of themselves, it's then that you can have the motivation to start doing the same for others, isn't it?

[9 : 51] I mean, how can we not? When we realize how much Jesus went through to put us ahead of him, how can we not start to learn and desire to put others ahead of ourselves?

As hard as that is. And so, become like Jesus because after all, that's the very purpose that God has in mind for you if you're a disciple of Christ.

In eternity, you will be like Jesus. Jesus is the perfect human being. He is the model human. He is the desire of God for all humans. He is what God wants us to be.

And in eternity, by God's grace, we will be like that. And if Jesus is therefore the essence of other person-centeredness, if that is what being a perfect human is about, and if that is what you are destined for, if you are a Christian, then that's what you need to start becoming now.

Because that's who Jesus is. And so that's our first motivation for pursuing this calling of other person-centeredness in our lives.

[11 : 01] The second reason that we are to seek the good of others before ourselves is because God is seeking our good for us. Now, one of the main reasons that this instruction is so difficult, you know, to please others ahead of ourselves, I mean, maybe I'm just, I don't know, maybe it's just difficult for me.

Maybe this whole sermon is pointless because you're all naturally doing that, but I don't know, I struggle. And the reason that it's so difficult to seek to please others ahead of ourselves is because we live in a dog-eat-dog world, don't we?

And if we don't look out for ourselves, who will? You know, that's at the back of our mind. I've got to look out for number one because I've got to survive. I've got to look out for my own interests.

Nobody else is.

If we're constantly thinking about the needs of others, who's going to look after our needs? Well, the answer, according to Scripture, is our Father in Heaven. Back in Romans 8.28, we read, in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him.

And so the Bible assures us that for His children, God is seeking their good always, their best interests. But if you don't believe that, if you don't really take that on board and believe that and live according to that truth, if you don't believe that God is looking out for you in all situations and seeking for your best, then you'll never really be able to be other person-centered, will you?

[12 : 28] Unless you truly believe that God has got your back. God is looking out for you. Because if you don't believe that, if you don't really take it on board, then you'll always have to default to looking after yourself first, looking out for yourself first, looking out for your own happiness and your own needs first, because no one else is.

And so it's so vital to know and trust that God is looking out for our best interests. It's like those rescue divers. You know those crazy people who jump from helicopters into the oceans that are in the worst situations in order to save someone else?

Those rescue divers, they're brave people and very talented and very strong swimmers and they go through crazy situations to rescue people who are drowning.

But you know what? They would still never dare to do that. No matter how brave they are, they would never jump out of that helicopter if they weren't sure that the helicopter was going to stay around after they jumped, right?

I mean, imagine the moment after a diver jumped, the pilot radios him and says, oh, whoopsie, it's just gone 4.30, I'm clocking out, see you tomorrow and away the helicopter flies. If that was ever a chance, they would never jump out.

[13 : 39] The diver's got to have absolute confidence the helicopter's looking out for him, ready to pluck him out of the water because it's only then that he can concentrate on rescuing others, right?

He's got to know that the helicopter's got his back. Well, in the same way, we've got to know if we are to look out for others, if we are to put the interests of others ahead of ourselves, if we're going to have any hope of doing what the Bible is calling us to do, being the people God is calling us to be, we need to know that God's got our back, that God's ready and waiting to look out for us, to look after us, to seek for our good in all situations.

And you know, that's an assurance that Jesus Christ himself had. The reason he could be so other person-centered is that he knew his Father God had his back.

Look again at that quotation from the Old Testament in verse 3. It says, Now, let's just stop there for a second.

More often than not, when, this is just a useful skill to know, when a New Testament writer quotes from an Old Testament verse, as is the case here, more often than not, he's not just referring to the one verse.

[14:54] He's actually wanting us to go back and read the whole passage from which that verse comes. And this is a perfect example. Paul, when he writes this, he doesn't just want us to look at that verse.

He wants us to go back and read Psalm 69, where it comes from, which Adrian read some of earlier. And when we read that, which you can do at home today, we discover that it's a Psalm of David during a time when his life was falling apart and he was surrounded by enemies on every side.

And this Psalm is his prayer to God, basically, in that dreadful situation. And it starts as a cry of despair. David just empties his heart out to God. He's just in despair. He's just in, you know, he's depressed and he's worried.

And he writes, the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths where there is no foothold. That's how he's feeling. But when we read on, we read that it's not just a cry of despair, this Psalm.

It's a call for God's justice. But it's also, when we read all the way to the end, we discover that despite his difficulty, David still believes that God will eventually deliver him.

[16:07] So listen to how he ends the Psalm. He says, I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. The Lord hears the needy. And so even though he was in the worst situation, he knew that God would eventually come through for him.

That God's justice would eventually be done and that God would look out for his good because he trusts in God. Because he was God's child.

And you see, that is the confidence that any child of God can have. No matter what life throws at you, God is a God who looks out for his children.

Be assured of that. And it was the same confidence that allowed Jesus to stop worrying about himself so that he could focus on saving you. You see, David is a foreshadow of Jesus.

And we see that more and more when we read about his life and when we read his Psalms. David's experience in his life was a preview of Christ's experience. So much of the details of this Psalm itself are fulfilled in the life of Jesus.

[17:14] And that's no mistake. David is a pattern of the one to come. And so just as David trusted that God had his back, so did Jesus. That's really what this reference to the Psalm is meant to point us towards.

It's meant to show us the attitude of Jesus. Jesus knew that he could give of himself to others. He knew that he could give up his life because his father would have his back.

He knew that he could go to the cross and die because his father would raise him from the dead.

You know, he could jump into that stormy ocean and save drowning sinners because he knew his father would pluck him out of death.

He knew his father would glorify him. And so he didn't need to worry about seeking glory for himself. We read that in Philipians.

Jesus made himself nothing by taking the very nature of his servant. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. And therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every other name.

[18:30] You see, that tells us Jesus didn't exalt himself. That's the important point there. He didn't seek his own glory. He sought for your good and my good because he knew that God was seeking for his good.

And that's why he was able to give of himself to us. And in the same way, you see, the more we trust that God is looking out for our good, the more we know that, the more we'll be freed up to look out for the good of others.

To use another example, it's a pretty mundane example, but I was writing this sermon on Thursday and the blood bank was here. And I was looking for an example and then I realized, actually giving blood is a fair example to illustrate this principle.

I mean, because if you think about it, the concept of giving blood is absolutely insane, isn't it? Blood is essential for life. So why on earth would you give some of your precious blood to someone else? It makes no sense. You've only got so much. You know, you've only got, what is it, five or six pints of blood. So why would you let someone take that precious blood out of you if you need it so much? [19 : 46] Well, the reason is, the reason that we can give blood, and we encourage you to give blood, is because we know that when we do, God has designed our bodies to provide us with replacement blood.

And the more we give, the more our body produces to compensate. But unless you know that, unless you go into the blood bank actually knowing that your body is going to produce blood to replace it, you wouldn't dare give blood, would you?

And in the same way, to give of yourself to another person, to give up seeking your own good for someone else's good, you know, to sacrifice time for someone else when you desperately need time to relax.

And we've all been in that situation. You will only be able to do that if you truly believe that God knows what you need more than you do, and that the more you sacrifice your own wants and needs for others, like Jesus, the more God will satisfy those wants and needs better than you could ever satisfy yourself.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 6, seek first the kingdom of God and righteousness, and all these other things, all these other things that you would otherwise be chasing after will be given to you as well.

[20 : 55] God has your back. God is looking out for those. Don't chase after your own desires and your own wants and your own needs. God will give those things to you more than you could ever give to yourself if you start putting the needs and the wants of others before yourself.

But do you believe that? Do you believe that God has your back? Do you believe that he is looking out for your best interests? Do you believe that God will give you the desires of your heart when you seek him and his glory and his will?

Because only then can you be freed up to seek the good of others like Jesus did. Only then can you start conforming to the image of Christ. That's the second motivation.

The final motivation that we read in this passage to be other person centered is because that's how God is glorified. Look at verse five. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind towards each other that Christ Jesus had so that with one mind and with one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we see here God gives us endurance and encouragement to live the way he calls us. He doesn't just call us to live a certain way. He also gives us what we need to endure life living that way because it's difficult and he gives us what we need to encourage us to spur us on to live that way.

[22 : 27] And he does that through his word, the Bible. That's why it's so essential to gather around his word every week and to gather around his word at Bible study and to read his word in your own private lives because it's through his word that God gives us endurance and encouragement.

When we close his word, when we ignore it, we start to dry up. Our endurance and our encouragement starts to dry up and we start conforming to the pattern of this world.

It's when we open his word that God continues to give us endurance and encouragement just like he's been doing this morning, I hope, for you through the examples of Jesus and David.

By reminding us that he's got our back. He's giving us endurance. He's giving us encouragement. He's reminding us of truth so that we can do what he calls us to do. And he does this not just to prepare you for eternity.

He doesn't just call you to be conformed to the image of Christ to prepare you for eternity. He does it so that in this world, verse six, you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[23 : 34] And that's really what it comes down to. We need to become these people now. Not just, you know, earth is not just a waiting room for eternity. Earth is a place where we have an amazing opportunity to glorify God in preparation for heaven.

We must remember we exist not for ourselves. We exist for the glory of God. That's the very reason we draw breath. To enjoy God and to glorify him forever.

That is the meaning of life. You know, lots of people say, oh, you know, I don't know, who knows what the meaning of life is. We know what the meaning of life is. The Bible tells us what the meaning of life is.

In the Westminster Catechism, the confession of faith, summarizes what the Bible teaches us is the meaning of life, which is to enjoy God and to glorify him forever.

Which means that unless we're glorifying God, there's really no reason for us to exist. And so how do we do that? How do we glorify God in our lives? Well, we do that by reflecting his attributes to the world around us.

[24 : 44] Just like a, you know, a sunset, I've said this before, a sunset glorifies God by displaying a part of God, an attribute of God. A sunset displays his beauty, for example. A thunderstorm glorifies God by displaying his power.

Well, humans are to glorify God by displaying an attribute that none of these other things can display, which is love, other person centeredness.

That is the attribute at the very heart of God. And humans are the only creatures in creation able to display it. God. And so that's how we glorify God.

That's how we fulfill the meaning of life. That's how we fulfill our purpose, by being other person centered, by being like God, by displaying that core attribute of God to the world around us.

because when we are, as a community of believers, when we learn to put the needs of others ahead of our own, when we learn to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, when we learn to trust that God is looking out for us so that we can look out for others, when we get this right and the world looks on and the world experiences this kind of counter-cultural people, that's when God is glorified in this world.

[26 : 09] That's when the world sees God. And that's when people will be willing to listen to our message. They say a picture paints a thousand words, right?

Well, we've got a thousand words to tell our world. We've got more. The story of salvation and the hope of eternal life and the truth of the gospel message. But it's when we paint the picture of the gospel in seeking the good of others before ourselves, us.

It's then when we are completely counter-cultural that we will shine as a light in a dark world, that we will contrast the world around us. It's then that the people of Plumstead, our neighbors and our work colleagues will not just hear the gospel from us, but they will see it and God will be glorified.

Well, do you want to be an other person-centered person? Let's pray that that would be the case. Heavenly Father, your word challenges us.

We won't lie. Your word challenges us to do things which seem impossible, like you are challenging us this morning to go against our self-interested instincts and to seek the good of others.

[27 : 25] Lord, we need your help to do this. We do pray, Father, that you would help us to believe that you are watching out for us, that you can seek our good and our desires and you can satisfy us greater than we ever could satisfy ourselves.

Help us to believe this so that we can follow in the footsteps of Jesus and that we can start being other person-centered people. Lord, and as we grow in our love for you and our love for one another, we pray that the world would look on and that through it you would be glorified and people would come to hear the gospel and that they would come into your family and be transformed to be the people you want them to be as you transform us, Lord, daily to be the people you want us to be. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.