

4/22 Overview

Motivation

Let's get started by thinking about two words.

- biker = one who bikes, yes, but also a certain culture, attitude, statement, style;
 - Googling biker yields images of people without bikes, but that you would call bikers!
 - https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/718MiiiJiL._SX425_.jpg
 - https://media.gq.com/photos/560acc63dfc9eee35e9ebdc1/master/w_800/texas-biker-gang-gq-06-5.jpg
- lover = one who loves, yes, but focusing on eros, often illicitly
 - If I said something to someone at work about my lover, they would probably do a double-take, feel awkward, and not be sure how to respond.
 - *Does he mean...his wife?? Or is he confessing an affair?*

The Bible talks about us using the word "sinner."

I've heard pastors say we should think about that word kind of like those above, a *category*.

- sinner = one who sins, yes, but more than that, it's a categorical statement
 - One is a sinner not because there are specific sins.
 - Yes, having specific sins is a way that we can easily see that we are sinners.
 - But children who are not yet old enough to do anything good or bad are sinners, too.
 - Having sins reveals to us that we have sin forces operative within us, and thus deserve the category label "sinner."
 - We will return to this more on another day.

While it's a humbling and mournful thing to see our sins in this way, it also makes us value our Savior more, so it's a precious viewpoint in that sense.

(We will come back to that benefit later in the class.)

I want to talk now about a specific aspect of what it's like to be a sinner.

Have you ever had a time when you were confessing your sins to God, either in church or in private prayer time, and the Spirit helped you see a particular character flaw that undergirds many of your particular sins?

- The Spirit helps us know our need for Jesus, including:
 - Helping us look past our surface sins into the motives beneath them, strong forces operative in our heart.
 - Example:
 - I do many things because of how I think other people will perceive them, and me.
 - *Pride* is an undercurrent in many of my actions.
 - *This includes* actions that, by the time they surface, *are not actually specific sins.*

This kind of revelation is sobering: at times when we don't seem to be sinning, sinful forces in our heart are still at play.

Worse, they are being obeyed, reinforced, honored.

We can prune our surface sins much more easily than we can remove these deep roots.

"Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults." (Psalm 19:12)

- There are other motives that can easily undergird many of our actions; other examples:
 - Fear
 - **Selfishness, or perhaps more specifically self orientation.**

That's the motivation for this class.

- Selfishness is one of the deep roots that requires the Spirit to remove.
- I notice a deep root of self orientation at work within me, and I'm sure it's at work in all of us, and is worth reflection.
- While that reflection may be humbling and mournful, I hope it also makes us value our Savior more.

[brief pause for comments]

Content

(What will the class be about?)

Obligatory joke about my ability to teach a class on selflessness (Jack Miller's "Humility and How I Achieved It")

- But my motivation is as above; I'm coming as a fellow sufferer, not an expert.
- Bulletin blurb asks, "What makes a journey towards selflessness difficult?"
- We are all on that journey as part of our sanctification.
- I'm not claiming to be far enough along that journey to see clearer than others.
- I just make the slides.

Title: Is it about selflessness or selfishness?

- Well, you can't name a class selfishness, but studying one is studying the other.
- Very related concepts we will certainly touch on:
 - self awareness
 - self trust
 - self orientation
 - self actualization
 - self preservation
 - self sacrifice
 - self love
 - self affirmation
 - self glorification
 - self deprecation

Why this topic?

If I wanted to choose a deeply rooted sin topic, why not pride or fear, for example?
Because I think our self-orientation runs very deep.

- I've been struck by that in myself recently.

- I think it's profitable to think through.

An overly simple view of human beings

- When we try to design a computer system that can think like humans, a system that mimics a human brain, here's what we do:
- We make a big network of things that function kind of like neurons ("deep learning"/"neural nets").
- We feed input in one end and they process it and produce some output.
- We give it positive or negative feedback and the system adapts to seek to be more like positive feedback and less like negative feedback.
- Repeat this long enough and you can get some amazing results
 - [automatic recolorization of images](#)
 - [describing images](#)
 - [\[recognize car models as they drive by on a highway video feed\]](#)
 - [\[color outlines realistically\]](#)

But isn't that a little frightening?

- The thing we've designed to mimic our own brains is a thing that just repeatedly seeks positive feedback!
- That's eerily like what we actually are (whether the feedback is external or internal).
- Our environment feeds us experiences and our bodies and feelings create responses.
- We adapt, seeking things that make us feel good in body and mind.

This is the overly simple view; we are not that simple -- we not merely animals, seeking pleasure over pain, comfort over discomfort.

But that is certainly a part of who we are, and if we're not careful, that part grows.
This is a sobering thought.

A concrete example from my notes for this class

(Just read this exactly as is, without edits, written circa 3/5/18.)

- As I write this, I'm in pajama pants, because Spring Break has just begun for

Bentley, and I don't want to get dressed.

- I am just starting my "work" day now, at 9:30am, but obviously I'm not working yet--just writing something I was thinking about.
- I just verified that the thermostat was high enough to see me through the day, brewed some coffee, and was delighted to find half-and-half to put in it.
- Although I had to do a dog walk in the rain, I changed into dry clothes and put my pajama pants back on after it, to be cozier.
- My comfort-making capacities are fully functional this morning. I know how to seek pleasure in just about any given environment.
- I'd like us to start this class by recognizing just how deeply we are like this, even at times where it's innocent, like a cup of coffee and cozy clothes.
- We need this class because we're so oriented to our own comfort and pleasure that it's normal to us, as hard to see as the water for a fish.

[pause for comments]

Despite the fact that such an animalistic/computational view is overly simple, we buy into it when we oversee others.

- I find myself thinking through that lens when parenting: give consequences for bad behavior; reward good behavior.
 - When we did the parenting class, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* talked about how this paradigm is tempting, but a mistake.
 - Incentivizing good behavior through rewards/punishments just orients the child more towards pleasure-seeking, just more broadly.
 - It plays more into our self orientation, when we should be drawing children out of it, into something more.
- Some management practices in the workplace or policies in society are about "incentivization."

All this just to say:

The notion of a person as a pleasure-and-comfort-seeking machine actually makes sense to us, even though it's not the whole truth.

Something one of my kids said recently

- I'm just going to read you this quote.
- But first, you need to know that the phrase "non-player character" is a video game term for monsters/people controlled by the computer. That is, not the avatars of fellow players.
- "Dad, every once in a while I have this weird thought. I realize that I'm a real person with a real life, and I won't always be a kid. And other people are not, like, non-player characters. They're real people with real brains. And that's a weird thought for me."
- Slide with this definition: *Solipsism, noun, the view or theory that the self is all that can be known to exist (solus=alone, ispe=self).*

Does a quote like this from an at-least-10-year-old mean that we go through the first decade of our lives as solipsists? Are we *that* self-oriented? (He/she later confessed he/she's had that thought many times, not just recently, so maybe enlightenment comes earlier than 10.)

- **But as we start this class, let's recognize two things:**
 - **Our own comfort and pleasure is our default orientation; it is extremely natural and common for us.**
 - **Selflessness is, for the "natural man," completely foreign.**

[pause for comments]

OK time to get started. Let's define our terms.

- What selflessness is not
 - When I say, "selflessness," do I mean "humility?"
 - No, but they're related.
 - Differences:
 - humility is not very connected to specific actions, whereas selflessness suggests a type of behavior.
 - humility may come from self-oriented motives, such as fear of standing out, or a desire to be seen as virtuous, but selflessness is hard to bring about through self-oriented

motives

- Similarity:
 - C.S. Lewis said, "Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' ... He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all."
 - And I do think that selflessness involves not thinking about ourselves much at all.
- Maybe humility is a prerequisite for selflessness?
- When I say, "selflessness," do I mean "love?"
 - No, but they're related.
 - We may find ourselves talking about selfless love and love in general at various points in this class.
 - For instance, I Corinthians 13 will probably be one of our texts at some point.
 - But love in English means many things, some of which are very compatible with selfishness.
 - Usually we speak of love as feelings and the actions that support those feelings (1 John 3:18), which isn't how we think of selflessness.
 - But obviously the context of 1 John 3:18 (see vv16-17) make it clear that love and selflessness go together.
- When I say "selflessness," do I mean "forgiveness?"
 - This may seem like a silly question, because those words are not synonyms.
 - But again, they're very related.
 - Consider what forgiveness requires:
 - I may want revenge, but I will put aside my desire for it.

- I accept the pain another has caused me.
 - By virtue of doing so, I give peace to the perpetrator.
 - So perhaps we should say that forgiveness is one way to put selflessness into practice.
 - When I say "selflessness," do I mean "being a doormat?"
 - No, many kinds of careers or actions may require one to be brave, strong, and selfless, all at once:
 - soldier (or other emergency personnel)
 - advocate (lawyer, ombudsman, case worker)
 - whistle-blower
 - Now that we've outlined what I don't mean by "selflessness," let's talk about what I do mean.
- Finally, a definition
 - Although the word contains its own definition, let's get more specific.
 - For the purposes of this class, we'll say selflessness is:
 - An orientation towards others (both people and God) that prioritizes their good over one's own
 - Not including one's own personal benefit among the motives for one's decision-making

[pause for comments]

We did not have time on 4/22 to discuss the final two topics that I wanted to discuss; we only touched on them briefly.

- The greatest commandments, in Matthew 22:34-40, and how they relate to our topic

- How we can teach a class that encourages a specific virtue without undermining the gospel

We will return to those topics in greater detail more than once in future weeks of the course.