

5/27 Practical Selflessness and Gospel-Driven Virtue

Selflessness in ordinary relationships

Themes to notice in each of the situations we'll talk about:

- People want to be known deeply
 - When I've been accused and I make defenses for my actions, in some sense I'm clawing for you to understand who I am.
 - God promises this to us in I Cor. 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."
 - He also promises it to us in a touching and beautiful way in Revelation 2:17, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it."
 - No one calls me Nay except my wife and my parents; it would be strange to have anyone else do that intimate thing.
 - Names in scripture have great significance.
 - Secrets shared draw people closer.
 - Here God brings all that together in this promise. He has a secret name that he will share only for you, and no one else will call you by that name.
- Empathy, which flows out of knowing someone deeply
 - The CTK elders have recently been looking into getting training to handle things we're not currently prepared to handle, such as situations of sexual misconduct.
 - One of the things we were recently told by an expert in that area is the importance of looking at the situation from the victim's point of view.
 - Just that one thing can take you a long way to knowing the right thing to do in the situation.

Selflessness in various situations

- I'm going to list this in increasing order of meatiness. That is, we'll start with things that you might just find in a secular self-help book, and end with things that are uniquely Christian. For time constraint purposes:
 - I want to go through the secular ones quickly, because they are the ones that sort of belong in SS the least.
 - I want to spend more time on the ones in the middle of the pack, because I find them to be the most interesting.
 - And we may end up skipping the most Christian of them, because in some sense they're the ones in which selflessness has the most obvious applications.
- I will bring up the topic of each situation, then I'd like to hear how you think selflessness plays out in that situation, then I'll share what I prepared, which fits in with the theme of people's wanting to be understood.

First, the categories that our secular friends think about and would probably enjoy discussing with us

- Situation 1: Everyday conversation
 - How can we practice selflessness here?
 - Explain the selections from the question-asking research paper abstract.
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 - This fits in with the theme of people's wanting to be known and understood.
 - This is very related to the more general question, "How can I make this interaction go in a way that the other person hopes for (even if they don't know it)?"
 - Asking and listening are a good way to make progress on that bigger picture idea.
 - This is a great way to keep selflessness in my mind pervasively throughout life; seeing each interpersonal interaction as a way to show love.
 - This is what many folks praised Dan Rogers for yesterday at his goodbye luncheon--filling even the simplest interactions with obvious love for the other person.

- Situation 2: Social media
 - How can we practice selflessness here?
 - Tom Wolfe quote on status; very related to the
 - To a large extent, social media is a tool for telling a story about myself that makes me look good
 - It is an extension of our natural desire to self-justify.
 - Because access to it is often within easy reach, what would have been an unavoidable moment of reflection 10 years ago becomes today an opportunity for...opining? posturing? comparing?
 - My suspicion is therefore that selflessness in social media plays out by being aware of this tendency Wolfe brings up, and not letting it take hold. This will probably imply a lot less interest in social media.

Next, some categories in which our faith is more integral or obvious

In this category, I have some stories to tell.

- Situation 3: Parenting
 - One day one of my daughters did not want to go to school, and was having somewhat of an emotional meltdown over it.
 - She intentionally missed the opportunity to walk to school and thus needed to be driven there.
 - In the car on the way, she kept saying, "I canNOT. I CAN'T!"
 - I was largely (though unconsciously) focused on how this situation inconvenienced me, and I assumed that this way of speaking ("I can't") was just the exploration of a new strategy in the struggle for power that teens and pre-teens have.
 - I addressed the issue that way for awhile and was completely unsuccessful in making progress against the attitude.
 - This connects to Rick's interpretation of I Corinthians 13:7 ("love...believes all things") regarding not being suspicious, but generous with our opinions.
 - Eventually, I decided to try praying together.

- Then the child began to tell me all the challenges she anticipated facing that day at school, socially and academically.
- If I had thought from her point of view from the outset, I might have assumed she was actually trying to say something real, and tried to get to know what it was she had to say, and thus gotten to the point of sympathy and help a little sooner.
- Once I actually listened to her talk about her challenges, she was calm, we were able to pray about the challenges, and she felt more ready to face the day.
- We also talked about how "I can't" is a normal feeling for finite people, and it sends us running to the one who can do all things.
- The theme shows up here again also: despite being an articulate person, she didn't know how to communicate what she really wanted to communicate. What she needed from me was patience with the need to engage, understand, and empathize.
- Situation 4: Service
- The Billy Graham quote may be overstating things; one could make a good case for the importance of other kinds of worship as well.
- But the scriptural quotes connect love and service quite clearly.
- For this situation, I have two stories I want to tell.
 - They don't actually fit in as well with the theme of people wanting to be known.
 - But they fit in very well with the overall theme of selflessness, and I have a different conclusion I want to draw from them, related to these verses.
- Tell the story of Pop at Mom's funeral.
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- One upshot of this story is the idea that love and service are tightly connected.
 - I John 3:18 says that actions of service can be a proof that love is true love.
 - John 15:13 even suggests that self-sacrifice is not just evidence of love, but a necessary component of love.
 - That is, loving means wanting the other to be prioritized over me.

- So my grandfather could actively keep expressing his love (and his commitment to his marriage vows) in a language that his wife could always understand.
- Tell the story of Bob Kaplowitz and I saying that we loved each other, and meaning it, and it was not at all awkward, but great.
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- This story has two purposes
 - As in the previous, love and service are tightly connected. I could say I loved him because I had literally just spent a week actively loving him.
 - But more than that, sacrificially loving someone can bring about the corresponding feelings of love, which is amazing.

Finally, two uniquely Christian categories

- Situation 5: Prayer
 - How can we practice selflessness here?
 - There are several ways that prayer and selflessness relate tightly.
 - Prayer, rightly understood, necessitates being small before God. (Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.)
 - Prayer should include interceding for others.
 - Prayer should include gratitude at one's blessings, which when seen rightly before God, are clearly undeserved.
- In the quote on the slide, Elisabeth Elliot claims that selfless prayer can actually be personally refreshing, even when burnt out.
- Situation 6: Evangelism
- How can we practice selflessness here?
- I am weak in the area. My flaws in the past have usually been these:
 - When I was afraid for my own reputation, I simply didn't witness. This

was selfish.

- When I was convinced I needed to change my cowardice, I shared awkwardly and annoyingly. This was a different kind of selfish.
- Now, I am somewhere in the middle, but still too much on the quiet side.
- Dan Rogers's example
 - Yesterday there was a goodbye party for Dan Rogers, pastor of CTK Dorchester.
 - So many people talked about how loving he was.
 - People told how, when they were outside the church, he invited them in, but in such a warm way that delighted in them as a person that it was winsome.
 - People told how, when they were inside the church, and he had to tell them about their sin, he was so loving and caring that they couldn't take offense.
 - So his example of obvious love and caring for others seems to be a crucial part of his evangelism.

Virtues and the gospel

Why we're talking about this:

- Any class that looks at a particular virtue could militate against the gospel if we're not careful.
- Our natural desire to earn our righteousness + a church emphasizing Christian duties = a deeply affirmed and solidified desire to earn our own righteousness.
- For this reason, CTK usually stays far from emphasizing the value of duty/virtue/good living.
- But since Scripture has plenty of calls to virtue, including many specific ones, it is possible to call people to it without crushing the gospel message.
 - In fact, if we look at the 21 letters of the New Testament, we see a mix of theology (shown in blue on the slide) and practical instruction (shown in

yellow on the slide). Some letters are both mixed so much that I just show them as green.

- Note that some books are all practical (all yellow) and none are all theological (though II Peter comes close).
- The general pattern is theology in the first half, then some transition verse, and then practical applications in the second half. Example transition verses:
 - Romans 11:36-12:1
 - For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.
 - I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
 - Ephesians 3:20-4:3
 - Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,
 - to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.
 - I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
 - with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,
 - eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
 - Philippians 3:20-4:1
 - But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,
 - who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.
 - Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy

and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

- So since the Bible clearly has commands to virtues, there is a way to think about them that's consistent with the gospel.
- Furthermore, since they often follow immediately on the heels of theology, with a "therefore" in between, there is some kind of important connection between the two.

Let's start with a contrast:

How are we *not* supposed to think about pursuing virtue? That is, what's the danger we want to avoid?

- So imagine that we are contemplating some virtue, such as selflessness.
- Further assume that, without any reference to the gospel, for any of a variety of motives, we decide to try to practice that virtue.
- Two things might happen:
 - We might "succeed"
 - This is in quotes because, as we've talked about before, our motives are never pure.
 - So we might succeed either by having unusually good behavior or just a conscience that's not working so well, and thus it assesses our half-decent behavior as good behavior.
 - This is the first danger we want to avoid, because this leads us to a false sense of righteousness. That is, we get the illusion that we can be righteous if we try to practice a virtue and actually get somewhere with it.
 - So our behavior gets better, but our apprehension of our relationship to God gets distorted.
 - That is, the second greatest commandment gets (sort of) followed, at the expense of the first.
 - Or instead we might fail.
 - We might fail because we have bad behavior -- that is, we don't end up acting selflessly.
 - Or we might fail because we have a good conscience -- that is, we

act rather selflessly, but correctly perceive that our heart is never 100% good.

- So then what?
 - Well, you might just hop back in the saddle and try again. Maybe even with prayer to help you out.
 - Or you might get depressed and just give up, ending in despair.
 - Or we might experience something entirely other, which we'll talk about in a moment.
- But first let's talk about what kind of motivations there might be for pursuing a virtue without reference to the gospel. Why might we do that?
 - Here are four examples.
 - Note that many of them are actually good desires.
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 - But every one of these things is a burden.
 - This is why Jesus says come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
 - It's why in Pilgrim's Progress, he carries a burden throughout the story, until he lays it down at the cross.
 - This is the third place our failure might lead us.
 - Paul said that failure to obey the law can act as a tutor to show us our need for Jesus.
 - In him, we see a perfect example of every virtue fulfilled.
 - In the particular example of selflessness, we see these things (on the slide).
 - He also calls us to those virtues, and in many ways, our reason for pursuing them is all about our relationship to him, as we'll see now.

This is the right way to pursue a virtue--in the context of the gospel, and only after coming to the cross.

Let's see how that changes everything.

- We begin with our failure to be holy leading us to need Christ as our substitute.
- Once we've received the forgiveness that he offers on the cross (not just a removal of our sins, but a gift of his righteousness), everything is different.
- We still pursue virtues, such as selflessness, but for completely different motives.
 - Earning favor with God is completely off the list; that burden is lifted.
 - You do not need to strain for righteousness or favor; you have both in ridiculous abundance.
 - Illustrate this with the story of Tanya and the gingerbread house ingredients, re: mentalities of scarcity vs. abundance.
 - We know that what applies here is a mentality of abundance, because we are favored as Christ is favored, and have the same righteousness that he does.
 - Ephesians 2:10 says "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." That is, one of the reasons for our salvation is that we might become able to do good works that God has prepared for us to walk in. We know we have been saved for a reason, and it's to participate in God's plan.
 - Tell the story from We Were Eight Years in Power, the reason the author gives for his atheism.
 - What God wants is the opposite of that reason: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." (Habakkuk 2:14)
 - The joy of being adopted into God's family and given that purpose makes us want to participate in him, and take on the characteristics of the family into which we've been adopted.
 - Gratitude and wonder regarding our Savior makes us want to pursue him and walk as he walked.
 - None of these motivations are burdens; any virtues that come out of these things are much more like offerings of thanksgiving.
- So what are the possible outcomes?
 - Well, again, we might "succeed."

- Still quotes, because we are not yet glorified, and still have sinful motives that are always mixed in with our good deeds.
 - But at least now some of the motives are good; to participate in God's plan for the world, to want to give an offering of thanks, these are pure motives that the Spirit brings about within us, so at least some of the reason for pursuing the virtue is God-given and good.
 - The result then is not a false sense of righteousness, but a joy that we're able to act like our Father and Savior and participate in our God-given purpose.
- Or we might fail.
 - Because Christians do.
 - And this is why Rick is often reminding us that repentance and believing the gospel are not just for unbelievers to do once to get into the faith.
 - They are where Christians always need to return when we sin.
 - But no longer are the options despair or just trying harder; now the result of failure is a greater apprehension of what we've been saved from and how amazing our Savior's righteousness is.
 - That is, we go right back to the cross, now appreciating it even more than the last time we were there.
- That's not to say that there is no possibility of discouragement here.
 - To return for a moment to the example of *We Were Eight Years in Power*: the book is about the pervasive and systemic racism in America. If you're working against a problem like that one, you could imagine that it won't be solved in your lifetime, and maybe not for generations, if then. How could you not get discouraged?
 - It's extremely important to remember that promises that this world is not the end.
 - Not only will God and his good plans for the world eventually triumph, but that takes place not only in the world, but also in my heart.