

WHAT IS OUR PROBLEM?

(2 Timothy 3:1-9)

Ted Schroder, July 11, 2010

What is our problem today? Pundits of all stripes have their opinions. At a recent conference a speaker quoted Oprah Winfrey as saying that all, or most, personal problems today are due to low self-esteem! He then went on to say that studies of such people as the Columbine killer Eric Harris showed, to the contrary, that their problem was excessively high self-esteem or a superiority complex. Harris wanted to illustrate his massive superiority to the world. A superiority complex (as opposed to an inferiority complex) demonstrates an overly high opinion of oneself, an unrealistic and exaggerated belief that one is better than others. It often creates cognitive dissonance, the contradiction that occurs when such positive self-regard (the goal of Rogerian therapy) experiences self-doubt. To reinforce your self-image you have to deny your shortcomings. (cf. Aesop's Fable, *The Fox and the Grapes*.)

St. Paul characterizes society in these last days of the Messianic era – the days since the resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Spirit: “People will be lovers of themselves...rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power.” (2 Timothy 3:1-5, NIV) “People are going to be self-absorbed...and allergic to God. They’ll make a show of religion, but behind the scenes they’re animals.” (*The Message*)

Our society is driven by the ideals of therapy and consumption (“lovers of money and lovers of pleasure”). We seek satisfaction for ourselves, the fulfillment of our desires. Titles about the pursuit of self-awareness, self-esteem, wholeness and well-being are paramount in any bookstore. “To be self-centered is a twenty-first century virtue... One who fails at ‘project self’ (a failure defined by the individual’s own ideas of success based upon cultural and social influences) must gaze into the mirror and confess: ‘Against you alone have I sinned.’” (Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 21) It is never our fault. We are always the victim. Blame is the only game in town.

If this is so it explains why Paul describes such lovers of self as “boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, treacherous, rash, and conceited.” The human condition as described in terms of ‘project self’ has a view of one’s possibilities that is often unrealistic, i.e. proud not humble, treating others as means to ends, despising parents and the elderly, biting the hand that has fed them and nurtured them, because they don’t want to be beholden to anyone. We can become ungrateful, and uncaring because we think we do not need others. In fact lovers of self can become self-destructive, hurting the friends and loved ones they have been closest to, and turning on them when they are challenged about their selfishness. They have an inflated idea of their own importance, which makes them feel that they are invulnerable to criticism. They are accountable to no one but themselves. Their lives are self-serving, and as such they cannot maintain intimate relationships. They become isolated. They become unwanted. They hide behind a façade of bluster.

Lovers of self are congenitally unable to share themselves with others. All their attention is on their own self-realization. In every relationship it is all about them. There can be no mutuality, no reciprocity, if the relationship is all about one person at the expense of the other. They long for intimacy, to have a deep sense of connectedness with others but their pursuit of self-fulfillment pushes others away.

We have an image of our ideal-self, what we want to be, what we want others to think of us, the person we aspire to be. But we fall short of this ideal, and struggle with a deep sense of failure and shame which we try to deny and cover up.

“Our problem is this: we have even created a narcissistic form of Christianity, in which ‘conversion’ is less a turning towards Christ than a turning toward success or fame or fortune. Narcissus never had it so good than in best-seller Christianity, which has become self-centeredness wrapped up as ‘spirituality,’ which has become the latest fashion accessory for the person who has everything. A survey of the Christian Book Association’s best-selling books as we began the twenty-first century found that family and parenting topics accounted for nearly half the titles, with the rest focused mainly on the self....We have made conversion primarily about ourselves and a fulfilling of ourselves. We’ve made it a journey of self-discovery rather than a journey of God-discovery.” (*Jesus Manifesto*, Leonard Sweet & Frank Viola, 100)

Another characteristic of the age is that people are “always learning but are never able to acknowledge the truth.” (2 Timothy 3:7) They quote every opinion but never commit themselves to anything. They make light of the convictions of others by seeing themselves as superior in intelligence and therefore make fun of them.

In contrast to these characteristics are those of the kingdom of heaven listed by Jesus. (Matthew 5:3-11) Lovers of God are poor in spirit, they mourn, they are meek, they hunger and thirst for righteousness, they are merciful, they are pure in heart, they are peacemakers, they are persecuted for righteousness. Or as *The Message* states:

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are – no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourself proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you’ll find yourself cared for.

You’re blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you ever deeper into God’s kingdom.”

You find your true self, proper self-love, your true fulfillment when you find the true God in the face of Jesus, and are turned from improper love of self to love of God. The answer to our problem of self-absorption is to discover the love of God in Jesus. We have to be willing to ask for it, for it to be given us; to seek it in order to find it; and to knock before the door is opened. In other words, we must pursue it as much, if not much, much more as we pursued love of self, or love of money, or love of pleasure.

St. Augustine said it well: “You have created us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” When you find the love of God, you will find true love, and your true fulfillment. St. Paul affirmed: “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

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