

Dealing with Selfishness

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Key Scripture

Philippians 2:3-4 (ESV) Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Sermon in One Sentence

Genuine Christ-likeness compels us to humble ourselves and prioritize the needs and interests of others above our own, liberating us from the destructive grip of selfishness.

Introduction

I recently read a poignant account from a marriage counselor who remarked that the overwhelming majority of marital conflicts she encountered stemmed, at their root, from one or both partners operating out of a self-centered perspective. We see it everywhere, don't we? From the driver who cuts you off in traffic, to the politician who prioritizes personal gain over public good, to the subtle ways we guard our time, resources, and even our opinions, selfishness is a pervasive and insidious force. It's a fundamental human struggle that infects our relationships, hinders our spiritual growth, and distorts our understanding of God's design for us.

This isn't merely a social problem; it's a spiritual one. The Apostle Paul, writing to a vibrant but not-so-perfect church, directly confronts this foundational issue. He understood that genuine Christian community, and indeed genuine Christian living, is impossible when selfishness holds sway. His words cut to the heart of what it means to follow Christ in a community of believers.

Today, we turn our attention to Philippians 2:3-4, a passage that offers not just a strong rebuke against selfishness, but a profound blueprint for overcoming it through the power of Christ-like humility. This isn't an incidental exhortation; it's a foundational call to live out the very character of Jesus in our daily interactions.

Historical & Biblical Context

The Apostle Paul wrote the Epistle to the Philippians from prison, likely Rome, around 61-62 AD. Despite his confinement, the letter is characterized by joy and encouragement, aimed at a church he deeply loved and considered his partners in the Gospel. Philippi was a Roman colony, and its citizens were proud of their Roman heritage, often exhibiting a competitive, self-assertive spirit. This cultural backdrop often seeped into the church, creating potential for disunity and personal ambition.

Paul's overarching purpose in Philippians was to encourage unity, steadfastness in the face of persecution, and joy in Christ, regardless of circumstances. He grounds these exhortations in the supreme example of

Christ's humility and self-sacrifice (Philippians 2:5-11). Our key passage, therefore, is not a standalone moral platitude. It is a direct command flowing from the powerful theological statement about Christ emptying Himself for us. Paul is essentially saying: "If you want to understand true Christian community and spiritual maturity, look at Jesus, and then apply His example to your own lives, especially in how you interact with one another." It's an urgent call for practical Christ-likeness to counteract the ever-present human tendency toward self-absorption, fostering a community that truly reflects its Savior.

Main Point I — The Condemnation of Selfish Ambition and Conceit

Scripture: Philippians 2:3a Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit...

Paul begins with a strong negative command: "Do nothing" from these two detrimental forces. "Selfish ambition" (eritheia) refers to self-seeking, rivalry, or a desire to put oneself forward, often manifested in unhealthy competition or partisan spirit. It's a motivation driven by self-interest and a craving for personal advantage. "Conceit" (kenodoxia) means "empty glory" or vainglory – an inflated and unwarranted self-estimation, a seeking of praise or honor for oneself that is ultimately hollow. Both create division, destroy fellowship, and are antithetical to the spirit of Christ.

This isn't merely a suggestion; it's an imperative. Paul understands that selfish ambition and conceit are not neutral behaviors; they are active agents of destruction within the body of Christ and within our own souls. When we act from these motives, we are fundamentally misaligned with the Gospel. Our actions, even seemingly good ones, become tainted if their root is self-promotion rather than genuine love or service. Paul calls the Philippians, and us, to examine the "why" behind our "what." It's a call to profound self-awareness and integrity of motive, recognizing that our inner disposition profoundly impacts our outer life.

Main Point II — The Command to Cultivate Humble Esteem for Others

Scripture: Philippians 2:3b ...but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

In stark contrast to selfish ambition and conceit, Paul delivers the transformative command: "but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." The Greek word for "humility" (tapeinophrosune) implies a lowliness of mind, a realistic self-assessment that doesn't inflate one's own importance but rather acknowledges one's dependence on God and the equal value of others. To "count others more significant" (hegoumenoi allelou huperechontas heauton) is not a call to self-deprecation or to deny your own God-given worth. Rather, it's a conscious, intentional choice to esteem, honor, and prioritize the well-being and interests of your brother or sister in Christ as if, or even more so than, your own.

This requires a radical shift in perspective, a deliberate act of the will. It's an active decision to adopt Christ's servant heart (as elaborated in verses 5-11). When we genuinely view others as more significant, it transforms our interactions. It means listening more patiently, serving more willingly, forgiving more readily, and sacrificing more freely. It's about moving from a posture of "What can I get?" to "How can I give?" This humble esteem for others is the very antidote to the poison of selfishness, breaking down barriers and building up genuine, Christ-centered community.

Main Point III — The Challenge to Prioritize the Interests of Others

Scripture: Philippians 2:4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Building on the foundation of humble esteem, Paul then gives a practical directive: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." This verse clarifies that prioritizing others doesn't mean abandoning all self-concern, but rather expanding our focus. It's not "instead of your own interests," but "not *only* to his own interests." It implies a broadening of our vision to include the well-being and concerns of those around us, especially in the Christian community. We are to actively seek out, identify, and address the needs and interests of others.

This challenge calls us beyond mere passive good intentions to active, empathetic engagement. It means intentionally putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, considering their perspective, and being willing to exert effort, time, and resources to support them. It's the opposite of tunnel vision, where our world revolves solely around our own desires and comforts. This principle applies to every sphere of life: in our families, workplaces, friendships, and especially within the church. It's the practical outworking of love, demonstrating that we value people not for what they can do for us, but for who they are in Christ.

Illustration

A powerful illustration of prioritizing the interests of others comes from the story of the Titanic. As the magnificent ship sank in the frigid Atlantic, acts of profound selflessness unfolded amidst the chaos. Colonel John Jacob Astor IV, one of the wealthiest men in the world, secured his pregnant wife into a lifeboat, then stepped back, knowing he would not survive, allowing others to fill the remaining places. Benjamin Guggenheim, a wealthy American businessman, and his valet changed into their best evening wear, declaring, "We've dressed in our best and are prepared to go down like gentlemen," giving up their seats to women and children. These were not Christian believers (as far as we know), but their actions, driven by a code of honor, dramatically illustrate the profound impact of prioritizing the lives of others above one's own, even unto death. How much more should we, as followers of Christ, be compelled by His perfect example of self-sacrifice to live for the good of others?

Practical Application

- 1. Motivations Check:** This week, before you act or speak, pause and ask yourself: "Am I doing this from selfish ambition or conceit, or out of genuine concern for others?" Realign your intentions with Christ's example.
- 2. "Others First" Moments:** Intentionally identify one or two specific areas where you can put someone else's interests before your own. This might be in your home (e.g., doing a chore someone else dislikes), at work (e.g., helping a colleague even if it delays your own task), or in your church (e.g., volunteering for a less visible role).
- 3. Active Listening:** Practice active listening this week, particularly with those closest to you. Rather than waiting for your turn to speak or formulating your response, truly focus on understanding the other person's perspective, without judgment or immediate correction.

4. Identify a Need: Look around your sphere of influence—family, friends, church, neighborhood. Identify a specific, unspoken need in someone else's life and prayerfully consider how you might humbly and practically meet it, without seeking recognition.

5. Daily Humility Prayer: Begin each day this week with a prayer asking God to expose any selfish motives within you and to empower you by His Spirit to "count others more significant than yourselves."

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you most commonly see "selfish ambition" or "conceit" manifest in your own life or in the world around you?
2. What does it practically look like to "count others more significant than yourselves" in your family, workplace, or church?
3. How can we distinguish between healthy self-care and unhealthy selfishness?
4. How does Jesus' example (Philippians 2:5-8) empower and inspire us to overcome our natural tendency toward selfishness?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we confess the pervasive power of selfishness in our hearts. Forgive us for the times we have sought our own interests above all else, for our pride and our lack of humble esteem for others. We pray for Your Holy Spirit to transform us, to give us the mind of Christ, that we may genuinely count others more significant. Help us to look beyond ourselves and actively seek the good of those around us, reflecting Your selfless love to a watching world. Amen.

Benediction

Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21, adapted)