



Self-Orientation Cripples Spiritual Awareness

Believers who follow Christ wholeheartedly know they must cease living for self (Luke 9:23-24) in order to love others (1 Corinthians 10:24, 13:5) and look after others' interests (Philippians 2:3-4).

Luke 9:23-24, And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

1 Corinthians 10:24 & 13:5, Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor . . . [Love] does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.

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

SELF-INTEREST WILL STUNT ONE'S GROWTH IN CHRIST

The above verses emphasize selflessness. If a believer disregards them, Christ-like growth is thwarted. On the other hand, when believers realize their self-centered disobedience to God's Word, they can confess these sins to the Lord (1 John 1:9) and, by God's grace, begin anew to deny self in order to grow in Christ.

1 John 1:9, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

For self-oriented believers, however, acknowledging their lack of Christ-like growth is almost impossible because they cannot accurately recognize their own spiritual stagnation. God, however, will use His Word, His Spirit, fellow believers, and even consequences of self-centeredness to awaken self-oriented believers from their spiritual stupor.

KNOWING ABOUT GOD INSTEAD OF KNOWING GOD

Apart from divine intervention and empowerment, self-oriented believers will remain in their woeful situation. Paradoxically, they may even think they are advancing spiritually because they are aware of some "spiritual" issues. For example, even self-centered Christians can list God's attributes, such as His goodness, mercy, love, grace, peace, patience, perfection, willingness to forgive, righteous judgments, omnipresence (present everywhere), omniscience (all-knowing), and omnipotence (all-powerful). Any person, however, can discover divine attributes in Bible reference books and still continue to decline into greater self-centeredness. On the other hand, when believers truly recognize and appreciate who God is and what He has graciously provided through Jesus Christ, they will respond in ways that bring glory to His Name.

The disparity between merely *listing* or *knowing about* God's attributes and *recognizing their reality and responding accordingly* is a revealing measure of one's level of self-centeredness. One of the most glaring examples of this disparity is found in Matthew 18:21-35 . . .

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

The forgiven, yet ungrateful, slave was the recipient of the king's goodness that was saturated with mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Yet, the forgiven slave displayed his inherent self-centeredness when he failed to respond correspondingly in mercy, grace, and forgiveness toward a fellow slave.

Can believers be as forgetful and as spiritually blind as the self-centered servant? Yes, it can happen, and it happens far too often when believers allow self-centeredness to overwhelm the reality of who God is and what He has accomplished on their behalf.

SELF-ORIENTED RESPONSES OF THE MIND

In addition to self-oriented behavior that can be observed by others, self-centered believers also have self-centered thoughts and perspectives which are known only to themselves and God. For example, self-centered people embrace God's attributes when they are personally beneficial but neglect or question these same attributes when not to their liking.

- Believers appreciate God's omniscience when they obey Scripture, but they sometimes forget or deny God's all-encompassing knowledge when they purposefully disobey God's Word.
- Believers are comforted by knowing God is in total control of all situations, but they can complain when trials come into their lives or when prayers are not answered the way they want.
- Believers are thankful for God's omnipresence when they are in fearful situations, but they can easily ignore His never-failing presence when they choose to sin.
- Believers relish God's righteous judgments when adversaries seem to be punished, but these same believers hope, or falsely believe, that they won't receive divine correction when they themselves sin.
- Believers think it is appropriate that God is slow to anger with their own sinfulness but cannot accept that God can be slow to anger in response to others' sinful behavior.
- Believers are comforted that God exercises His patience in dealing with their own waywardness but cannot understand why God would be patient with others who sin.

Self-oriented believers often do not realize that inconsistent beliefs, such as those mentioned above, not only indicate chronic self-centeredness but also dishonor Christ.

GOD'S WAYS AND THOUGHTS ARE FAR BEYOND OUR COMPREHENSION

Clearly, situations in life can test the validity and strength of one's trust in God. Isaiah 55:8-9 reminds us of our limited wisdom and insight in comparison with God Almighty.

Isaiah 55:8-9, For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:10-11 goes on to emphasize God's gracious sovereignty.

Isaiah 55:10-11, For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

None of us can fully comprehend our Heavenly Father. Yet, as we respond to what we do know about God and accept His loving care, we learn to trust Him in greater measure. We also learn more of His unfathomable love and perfection. Even though our trust may sometimes falter, our Heavenly Father works all things to accomplish the ultimate good in the lives of His children (Romans 8:28).

Romans 8:28, And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.

He continues His work with each believer in Christ in spite of one's personal pain, confusion, faltering faith, or self-centeredness. In spite of our inability to make sense of various situations in life, we are assured that His never-failing goodness is unalterable . . . and perfect.

As believers put off self-oriented characteristics and, instead, trust God Almighty, the crippling effects of chronic self-orientation will diminish accordingly. Then, believers will increasingly recognize the fullness of God's goodness,

even in the most difficult events imaginable.

The following poem illustrates this reality. It was written by a husband (father of three young children) *during* the funeral service of his wife who had died giving birth to their fourth child who was stillborn.

He Maketh No Mistake

by A. M. Overton, 1932

My Father's way may twist and turn
My heart may throb and ache,
But in my soul I'm glad to know,
He maketh no mistake.

My cherished plans may go astray,
My hopes may fade away,
But still I'll trust my Lord to lead,
For He doth know the way.

Tho' night be dark and it may seem
That day will never break,
I'll pin my faith, my all, in Him,
He maketh no mistake.

There's so much now I cannot see,
My eyesight's far too dim,
But come what may,
I'll simply trust and leave it all to Him.

For by and by the mist will lift,
And plain it all He'll make,
Through all the way, tho' dark to me,
He made not one mistake. ¹

The fact that God makes no mistake is a spiritual reality that Christians throughout history have learned, often in the midst of very difficult circumstances. In and through trials that are unfathomable, followers of Christ have grown in their love for the Lord and obedience to His Word and, as a result, continue to mature in Him. Correspondingly, their self-centeredness diminishes.

The necessity of putting on Christ and putting away the self-life is not an isolated subject in life or in God's Word. The process is integral to being a wholehearted disciple of Christ and, as such, permeates many books in the Bible.

You may find it instructive as you read through portions of Scripture to notice the admonitions, examples, personal references, and teaching that relate to living in a Christ-honoring manner as opposed to living for self. To help you discover biblical principles related to putting on Christ and putting away the self-life, as you read, ask questions such as:

- How do individuals mentioned in this passage demonstrate either a whole-hearted commitment to Christ or a self-centered orientation to life?
- What aspects of self-centeredness does this passage highlight?
- What attributes of Christ that oppose self-centeredness are emphasized in this passage?
- In light of this passage, what must I do to put off self-centered living in order to grow in Christ?

A basic truth related to Christ-like maturity is this: If believers are not serious about *dying to self*, they cannot be serious about *growing in Christ*. On the other hand, if believers desire to grow in Christ, they will take corresponding steps to die to personal self-centeredness. These two concepts – growing in Christ and dying to self – are inseparably linked.

May God receive all the glory as His children practice self-denial in order to live wholeheartedly for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Footnotes

¹ See http://www.churchlead.com/mind_wanderings/view/1630

See also

Is Dying to Self Really Necessary? at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Dying%20to%20Self.pdf>

The Folly of Good Self Esteem at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/The%20Folly%20of%20Good%20Self-Esteem.pdf>

Is Jesus Lord of Your Life at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Is%20Jesus%20Lord%20of%20Your%20Life.pdf>

Is Self-Love Biblical? at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Is%20Self-Love%20Biblical.pdf>

Becoming a Christ-like Servant at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Becoming%20a%20Christ-like%20Servant.pdf>

Words – The Thermometer of Your Heart at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Words-The%20Thermometer%20of%20Your%20Heart.pdf>

Confession – Insight into the Real You at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Confession-Insight%20Into%20the%20Real%20You.pdf>

Loving Yourself – What does the Bible Say? at http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Loving%20Yourself_What%20does%20the%20Bible%20Say.pdf