

“The Loving Life of Self-Denial”
Philippians 2:1-11
July 21, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Next up in our study of 1 Corinthians 13 is a quality of love that approaches the heart of the matter. Love does not seek itself. The verb “seek” is one that has the idea of a diligent search. It is used elsewhere of a woman searching for a lost coin (Luke 15:8) or a shepherd searching for a lost sheep (Matthew 18:12). So the idea is that of a focused, single-minded search that will not stop until the sought after object is found.

We live in an age that promotes this kind of devoted search for self-fulfillment. Earlier this week, I was in a meeting with one of the key leaders of the mission agency, Serge, an agency with whom several of AVPC’s missionaries serve. Someone asked this seasoned missionary leader what threats to the work of missions keeps him up at night. His answer surprised me. He said that the biggest threat to the missionary work of the Church is the emphasis on self-fulfillment. When self-fulfillment is made the highest good, there is no room left for the greatest commandments. Both love for God and neighbor are displaced by self-love.

I believe the battle to love rages most fiercely at this precise point. Our three great enemies—the world, the flesh and the devil—all fight to maintain the ground of self-love. The flesh, which is the Bible’s word for our sinful nature, is naturally curved in on itself. Our sinful nature leads us to do the very thing this verse says we are not to do, to seek itself. To seek oneself is to believe that your needs and desires should get top priority, not only by you but by others as well. The world sends the same message, commending self-seeking through such courses as assertiveness training. As Lewis Smedes says, “We pay stiff fees to therapists to be cured of the neurosis of ‘not seeking our own.’” And the devil adds his tempting voice to it all, telling us that we deserve more than we are getting.

In his book, *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, Ed Welch begins by telling of something that happened to him as a high school senior. He had been nominated for a top academic award, and he says that he was scared to death that he would get it. The award would be given at an assembly of the entire student body, and he was terrified by such worries as what he would look like while walking forward to get the award, what he would say in his acceptance speech and what others would think of him. So he prayed, “God, please don’t let me get this award.” Then the vice-principal went to the front to announce the winner. Before saying the name of the winner, he described him in such a way that it could have been any number of students, and Ed Welch says that

he was beginning to sweat. Finally, the vice-principal announced, “And the winner of this year’s senior award is...Rick Wilson!” Was Ed Welch’s response one of gratitude that God had answered his prayer? He writes of his immediate response: “Rick Wilson! I couldn’t believe it! Of all people. No one even thought he was a candidate!” He reports that he thought of himself as a complete failure, worried about what people would think of him now that he didn’t get the award. While I can identify with that response, we need to remember that the Bible says that if we are to love, we will need to redirect this devoted search from our own self-fulfillment to seeking instead the welfare of our communities and those who live near us. Jesus, the perfect man, embodies this, as today’s passage explains.

I. The Foundation of Self-Denial

There are only two ways to approach relationships with others: out of neediness or out of fullness. To approach another out of neediness means that you need something from the other person in order for you to feel satisfied in the relationship. A man may want to marry a beautiful woman because he feels more a man when he has a wife who is the envy of other men. That is a relationship based on neediness. At its root, it is self-centered, and it leads to using people instead of loving people. Love is other-centered instead of self-centered, so it requires that we approach people out of a sense of fullness. It says, “I don’t need anything from you in order to feel validated, so I can be free to love you according to your needs.”

This is why Paul begins this section by talking about our fullness as followers of Christ. The sense of that little word “if” is really “since.” Our fullness begins with the fact that there is encouragement in Christ. Is there encouragement by being in Christ? Is there encouragement in knowing that your sins are forgiven fully? As the hymn says, “My sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.” There is encouragement in knowing that I have a glorious future that has been secured for me by Christ. There is encouragement in knowing that God promises always to be with me. There is encouragement in remembering that Jesus tells me repeatedly not to be afraid, because he knows that there is nothing of which I need to be afraid.

Is there comfort from love? I think in this second phrase of verse 1 he is talking more about the love of God’s people for one another than God’s love for them. Is there comfort from being loved by others? Wendy and I were in Philadelphia this week for some meetings I had there. Wendy went with me because we have a son, daughter-in-law and grandson who live there. While there, my 18-month old grandson really took a liking to me. If I was in the room, he wanted me either to hold him or play with him. There is comfort in knowing you are loved, a gift given to all Christians in the church.

There is also **“participation in the Spirit.”** Christians share in the life of the Holy Spirit. We are taken up into the most glorious fellowship in the universe, the fellowship within the Trinity itself. I discovered this week the origin of the phrase “beyond the pale.” An old meaning of the word “pale” is that of a wooden stake, the kind of stake used in a fence. To be “beyond the pale” means to be outside the fence. So it came to mean to be outside the protective inner place of safety, the walled city. To be beyond the pale means to be an outsider, cut off from the life of the community physically, psychologically and emotionally. We have been given the great gift of insider status with God himself. We are not beyond the pale. And now, within the pale, we receive affection and sympathy from others with us in this fellowship.

II. The Components of Self-Denial

Now that the foundation of fullness is laid for us in all that we have in Christ, Paul goes on to commend the life of self-denial. Verse 2 makes it clear that this is the path of love as he commends to us unity, **“having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”** We do that through self-denial, which he describes in verses 3-4. I want to focus our attention on verse 4. **“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”** To deny self is to be concerned with the interests of others, to do what you can to help others in matters that concern their welfare. It is a change of the orientation of our sinful nature, which always asks, “What do I need from others and how can I get it?” Self-denying love asks instead, “What do I have that I can give in service to others’ needs?” It is a completely different starting point.

Notice that this change of starting point doesn’t mean that I deny my own needs and interests. Notice that Paul says that it is okay to look to your own interests. Self-denial doesn’t mean that you ignore your own legitimate needs, only that you don’t focus exclusively on your own needs. A distinction I find helpful is to distinguish between means and end. We are not to regard the meeting of our needs as the end, the goal of our lives. Rather, looking to our own interests should be regarded as a means to the end of loving people.

Perhaps some examples would help. It is not wrong to be concerned about personal health and everything involved in that. To seek to eat right, get exercise and sleep enough are legitimate needs shared by us all. It is not wrong to look to these interests. But the life of self-denial Paul commends here would have us be concerned for these things not for selfish reasons, that I might feel good or get others to praise me. Rather, our concern should be to pursue health in order to have the ability to serve others. Personal health is to be regarded as a means serving the end of loving others.

Consider a second example. It is not wrong to spend some effort to know yourself well, including your personality type, your gifts and abilities, and your inclinations. But all these discoveries are to be put to the use of helping others rather than merely pursuing your own happiness. Careers should be selected by asking the right question. The wrong question is, “What career should I pursue in order to fulfill myself?” Or another wrong question is, “What career will bring me prestige and money?” The right question is, “Where is the intersection of my gifts and passions with the needs of the world?”

To love and serve others is the most demanding thing I can think of. It requires a great deal of energy. This includes both physical and spiritual energy. So we must invest in maximizing both our physical and spiritual energy if we are to love and serve others.

III. The Champion of Self-Denial

Anyone who has ever tried to live a life of love, which is always a life of self-denial, knows the difficulty of such a thing. Love usually digs into your schedule and your wallet, and most of us labor to protect both of those. Honestly, it is impossible in ourselves to live like this. That’s why Paul takes us to Jesus beginning in verse 5. We are to have the same outlook, the same mind as Christ, in this area of love. Jesus is our model for self-denying love.

As we noted from the first verse of this passage, Jesus started where all love starts, with fullness. Jesus was **“in the form of God.”** Before his incarnation at that first Christmas, Jesus had need of nothing. He enjoyed perfect fellowship and a fullness of joy within the Trinity. He didn’t launch his redemption effort of fallen humanity out of a need within himself, but instead started with this fullness. But then he made a decision, a decision to give up all the joy of his life in heaven. He did not regard it as a thing to be grasped and held onto at all costs. Next, he decided to serve. He made himself nothing and took the form of servant. He never came to the point of saying, “Enough! I’ve done all anyone could ever expect of me.” He went all the way to the end, dying the death of a condemned criminal. His rescue mission would not be complete until he died his atoning, substitutionary death. But the story doesn’t end with his death. **“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”**

Why does Paul tell this story of Jesus’ life from his pre-incarnate state all the way to his glorious return? Paul wants us to feel the beauty of this story as the one true story of reality. The self-fulfillment story is neither beautiful nor true. The story of self-denying love is both. There is only one true story, and it is this one. The application is to put yourself in this true story of beauty and to put away all false and ugly stories that lead to death. What are some of those

false stories? There's the orphan story that says no one will take care of me, so it's up to me to prove myself and provide for myself every day. I don't have time for other people because I have to take care of myself first. Or there's the narcissist story that says I am the most important reality in the world and everything and everyone must center on me. Then there's the self-pity story that always sees oneself as a victim of others with power.

How do you put yourself in this story? Paul tells us in verse 5 to **“Have this mind among yourselves.”** Interestingly, the verb is a passive verb, not an active one. If it were in the active voice, it would have the sense of “Make this your mindset.” But the passive voice has the sense of “Let this mind be in you.” In other words, someone else is in the active role while we are in the passive role. There is a power from God that brings us into this story of Jesus. He does so as we simply receive from him this ministry of Jesus by letting Jesus serve us. When we let Jesus serve us through his life of humility and his death of shame, we come to have all the fullness of God within us. Then we simply follow Jesus into this kind of self-denying love, confident that it will lead us to glory. It is the glory of life with Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

In his new book *J Curve*, Paul Miller tells of a time his wife was waiting in line to have Joni Eareckson Tada sign her new book. If you don't know Joni's story, she became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident when she was a teenager. As Paul Miller's wife, Jill, was waiting in line, the woman ahead of her saw Joni laboriously autographing her book by holding a pen in her mouth. This woman then said insensitively, “You poor thing.” Joni reacted immediately by dropping her pen, lifting her head, and beginning to sing songs of praise to Jesus. She was entering into this story of Jesus. Instead of entering into the story of self-pity which this insensitive remark was suggesting she should do, she entered into Jesus' story. She saw that she was sharing in the fellowship of his sufferings, but remembered that she was defined by the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

How about you? Will you enter into the life of self-renouncing love that leads to resurrection life? When the rigorous demands of love lead you into suffering, will you enter into Jesus' story? When someone treats you poorly and insensitively, will you enter into the story of power and retaliation or that of love? Who is it that God is calling you to love? Remembering all that you have in Christ, take a step of faith into that love.