

“Where Christ Dwells”

Psalm 4; Galatians 2:15-21

August 6, 2023

About a decade ago or so, Natalie and I took the kids to Northlake Mall on a Saturday to get them some shoes at Stride-Rite. It was a nice day and the kids were excited because right beside the Stride-Rite store where the clerks would make them try on shoes stood a really neat play area for children. I don't know if any of y'all remember it, it's long gone now, unfortunately. The area was enclosed by a half-wall and it was a long oval. Throughout the entire space were large, ceramic statues of Looney Tunes characters, I believe. Seems like there was a large Bugs Bunny but I could be wrong about that. Anyway, Natalie had some other errands to run in the mall so that left me with the kids. Thankfully, all along the inside of that half wall were couches for parents to sit on in order to watch their kids. It was packed being a mid-day Saturday at the mall but I found a spot. I immediately took out my phone and began checking messages, fooling around on social media, you know the deal. But then, for some odd reason, I caught a glimpse of some kids running around. Kids run around all of the time, right, no big deal. But what struck me were the giant smiles on their faces. They were having fun the way only children can sometimes, completely unburdened by the world around them, they were swept up in whatever game they were playing in the moment. The sight of that joy on those kids faces made me take a moment to survey the room. Suddenly I was aware that these weren't the only children having fun. No, in fact the entire play place was swamped with kids all experiencing such great joy. It was positively infectious. I simply couldn't take my eyes off of this spinning, whirling, running gaggle of children with their laughter and unadulterated happiness.

It was after a few moments of just watching the kids that my mind wandered onto another group. US, the parents that is. I circled the couches with my eyes and lo and behold what should I discover? Out of all the parents there that moment, I was the only one seemingly watching the kids. Every other set of eyes I could see was intently affixed on a little plastic and glass square they were holding in their hands. That's right. Everyone was playing with their phones. They were missing it. The Joy. The happiness. Now look, I don't say that to try and make myself look enlightened. Remember, I was just another set of eyes affixed on a screen at the beginning. No, what I realized is that we, as a society, were becoming more and more self-absorbed and here was visual proof – an entire room of parents gazing at their phones while their precious children were having the time of their lives.

That day serves for me as a visual reminder of a truth that is just now starting to emerge in our society in the era of social media. We forget sometimes as we scroll through our Facebook or X (formerly Twitter) feeds that the social media experiment is only around 20 years old. Sometimes it takes that long before a thing's effects begin to show up. But the preponderance of the evidence being brought forth at this time sure seems to indicate that, across the globe, we are becoming more individualistically focused. Now, let me just let you in on a little something here. That's a polished-up way of saying “selfish.” When you become more individualistically minded, that just means that you're spending an increasing amount of time thinking about, you guessed it, yourself.

“We didn't become bad or broken or selfish overnight. We just got carried away by this belief that we didn't really need each other, and by the delusion of being **connected** to the bigger picture through our phones- forgetting of course that it is the details of the smaller picture which make up the bigger whole. We began to prioritize quick chats over the affectionate touch of a friend's hand, and taking online surveys have accrued more value than sharing our struggles with family at the dinner table. We began to mistake **emojis** for human feelings, and we forgot that **likes** aren't actual smiles. And that they will never be.”

Now look, that's not all social media's fault. I don't make that claim. Rather it could be the case that social media is exacerbating a trend that needs no further acceleration. Now friends, I think we can all agree, this isn't a good thing.

But wait, you might say. How can I be more selfish if I'm a member of all sorts of groups and clubs online through social media? I connect with other people you might say. Ah, but that's where we're finding the that we're just hitting the tip of the iceberg. You see, social media only gives a faint approximation of real, human connection. Now what do I mean by that?

You know how all those social media sites have alerts, generally a little red flag somewhere. Well, those little red flags do a great job of allowing your brain to fire a little dopamine into your system giving you a momentary sense of feeling good. I mean, isn't it nice when you flash over to say Facebook and you see that little red flag. "Somebody is thinking about me" is your brain's first reaction and you feel good. And maybe this time it's a message from a long-lost friend. That's always nice, to reconnect with someone friendly from your past. Maybe the next time, one of the group's that you're involved with is having an event that they're announcing. Regardless of what it is, you just want that next red flag to appear to give you another jolt of feel good. But you know what, pretty soon you're hooked, constantly checking social media, quietly hopeful that this time you check, there will be one of those sparkling red flags you're looking for. It's a brain hijack. Those little red flags have a way of dominating your attention span and keep you coming back time and time again to your social media sites. Worse still, while you're waiting around for that next red flag, you miss out on actually calling a friend and having a conversation on the phone. Maybe, just maybe, you get so caught up on what's going on social media that you allow in-person friendships to dwindle down. After all, you think, your social needs are getting met, what's the difference?

Well, as it would turn out, there's a big difference. Because social media only delivers a portion of what a real-life, in-person connection offers. As such, over time, as you deal less and less with real people and more and more with online folks, the studies are showing that, you guessed it, you actually become MORE SELF-FOCUSED. Now look, I'm not here to demonize social media. As a matter of fact, I think it has some truly wonderful, gospel applications. Social media is only a tool, really. But one left undefined and unchallenged that can lead to the amplification of a natural tendency apart from Jesus – the drift to become more and more self-focused. That is to say that we don't really need social media to incline us towards selfishness, broken in sin, we kind of naturally do that anyway. This is why we so desperately need to keep in focus at all times the real Gospel. The true Gospel emerges from the pages of scripture as a shining light of God's amazing love and grace.

So, what is the Gospel? Last week and again today I use a definition I ran across from Baptist preacher John Piper. "The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins and rose again, eternally triumphant over his enemies, so that there is now no condemnation for those who believe, but only everlasting joy. That's the gospel."

This is the Gospel that Paul began promoting after his conversion. Earlier in Galatians, he tells us about it. Galatians 2:1-5: *"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you."*

Galatians tells us more about Paul's life first-hand than does any other letter in the New Testament. Here, Paul recounts what happens when he returns to Jerusalem after years of preaching the Gospel and plating churches. Again, Paul wants to make sure that the Good News he's sharing is in agreement with what's going on in Jerusalem. What he discovers is that there are some significant differences. As he alerts us to in Galatians, some of those Judaizers had slipped in among the Jerusalem faction and had influenced them. Remember, Judaizers believed that, to be a Christian, you still had to follow all the Jewish laws, including the dietary laws and circumcision. This outlook held sway in Jerusalem and you even hear about Peter not eating with uncircumcised Christians even though he had once before. So, Paul stands up to Peter. Now, wow, what a big deal this must've been. I can only imagine that as it unfolded, you could hear a pin drop. I mean, here is Peter, the rock upon whom Jesus says he'll build his church is confronted by a man who, just years prior, was putting to death members of the church. But Paul knows, the do-it-yourself Gospel is no gospel at all. And so he takes the stand and we're all the better for it.

It reminds me of a young woman I knew named Christian Peele. Now Christian was a seminary mate of mine. We both we classmates at Duke only there were some significant differences. The chief one being that Christian arrived at Durham as a 16-year-old. That's right, she was a genius but as nice and humble as anyone I've ever met. But, as we would learn, we push came to shove, she was no pushover. In the first class we had with a world-renown Biblical scholar, we were told NEVER to ask questions. It was a lecture and we were supposed to receive it as such. That meant never stopping the professor. Questions could be asked in our small groups with our PhD student leaders. But in the lecture, we were totally confused, all of us. The professor was talking about things we hadn't learned yet. So finally, after about five minutes of being confused, up goes that diminutive hand of 16-year-old Christian Peele. At first, the professor tried to ignore her, even asking her to put her hand down. Up it remained. Finally, he called on her. She informed him we hadn't had a class he thought we had. He spent the next several minutes getting us caught up and then we were able to move forward, no longer confused. All because little Christian Peele had the fortitude to stand up to the man, so to speak.

Well, Paul does exactly that with Peter and we are forever grateful for this puts to death the "Do-it-yourself" Gospel. But, to Paul's thinking, this is a perversion of the Gospel. A False Gospel really. We talked about those last week, remember? How there are all sorts of outlooks and beliefs that circulate within the church and within the culture that seemingly offer the same joys and comforts of the true Gospel but do not. First among those false Gospels was the "Do-it-yourself Gospel," although I don't think I called it that last week. The "Do-it-yourself Gospel" is the belief that by hard work and effort, you can earn your salvation and make yourself totally happy at the same time. And, believe me, in a world inclining towards greater and greater self-focus, this false Gospel is as prevalent as any. We tend to think that, if only somehow, somehow, I could be in control of things, I'd be happy. And what's the surest fire way to do that? Be fantastically wealthy, right? Now look out and see a society entirely fixated on the amassing of wealth. We read articles about Jeff Bezos and Tim Cook and salivate thinking about what we'd do with all that power and influence. Maybe we even buy lottery tickets.

I remember the first time the jackpot got to a billion dollars. Ironically, I was at seminary, working on a DMin in Pittsburgh of all places. We were done with class and, it being January, it was snowing. Truth be told, it had snowed every day that I'd been up there convincing me fully that I never wanted to live in Pittsburgh like ever. So, there was all this snow on the ground but, you know what, I simply had to get me a ticket. I mean, a Billion dollars, who wouldn't want that. So instead of studying or reading or hanging out with my classmates I resolved to get me one of those tickets. Problem – I'm a Southerner and have absolutely no business driving with snow and ice on the ground. God was with me that day, I assure you. And, no, obviously, I don't mean he helped me win the lottery. No, somehow I managed to make it to the convenience store and back without totaling my car or others in the snow and ice. And I'm grateful that I didn't win. Because as you might imagine, nothing so quickly fuels our descent into total self-absorption than does wealth.

Then take a moment and realize that's what we're all probably most focused on and all of the sudden it becomes clear – no wonder things are unravelling. Because when you really read the Bible one of the problems that most people are going to run across is that it is nowhere near as self-focused as our society is. While our society does everything it can to elevate the individual as the most important thing in the universe, the Scriptures do the opposite. The Word reminds us that the most important thing is God and that our happiness and productivity are linked in recognizing this important fact.

Proverbs 3:5-6 make this clear, I believe. *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."* Proverbs is an amazing book for imparting real, useful and practical knowledge about how to live rightly with God in this world. Here, we get just a two-verse destruction of the Do-it-Yourself Gospel. Where the world tells us to lean more heavily into ourselves, the Good News tells us differently. Instead of becoming more self-focused, the direction of our lives should see us more God-focused.

This is one of the many reasons Paul fights so vigorously against this particular False Gospel. Paul has seen and experienced how those that excel in the law act horribly towards those they perceive as inferior in their pursuits. This is one of the real reasons why the Do-it-Yourself Gospel doesn't work. It inclines us towards being more self-focused. When we think we're somehow earning our salvation on our own steam, the fact of the matter is that we become less forgiving, less loving, less oriented towards others. And this warps us. You see, we were created to be God's stewards on this earth, caring for others as we tell them about Jesus Christ. But as we become more and more filled with ourselves, we become less and less inclined to do much for or with others. And, again, we've got an inversion from what Scripture teaches us. Instead of living for others in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we simply look out after ourselves and those people immediately nearby us.

When we're focused on ourselves, and what we're doing, we miss this main thrust of this whole passage from Galatians. Here, Paul reminds us all that our faith is the anchor that ties us to Jesus Christ and that this faith that is so precious is, in fact, the gift of God. We are truly a blessed, blessed people!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

