

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Self-ishness vs Self-interest

(Isaiah 36-39; words from Jesus)

Introduction: The ugliness of selfishness...

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility consider one another as more important than yourselves.

The Apostle Paul; Philippians 2:3

"To be happy, we must not be too concerned for others."

Albert Camus

Selfishness is ugly. And from beginning to end, the Bible describes selfishness as a monstrous evil. Whenever we see it in our lives, we are to root it out.

For me to be selfish is for me to be only concerned for myself. It is for me to be wholly unconcerned for you.¹

So, yes, selfishness is ugly, but it is more than ugly. It is weak. The selfish Christian has no power to draw people to God. Selfishness doesn't promote God's kingdom. The selfish person doesn't love.

The selfish man or woman believes, *"It's all about ME."*

This morning we'll begin by thinking together about the theme of selfishness. We'll see selfishness in an Old Testament king we otherwise think very highly of.

¹ From The American Psychological Association: Selfishness is the tendency to act excessively or solely in a manner that benefits oneself, even if others are disadvantaged.

Then, we'll consider another "self" word that is not bad. It is, in fact, wholesome and holy and biblical. At least that's what Jesus says...

We find the selfish story in the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah's book records messages from his decades as God's prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah wrote a hard-hitting book. He called the Jews to repent of their sin.

Style-wise, most of the book is poetry, with the exception of one section. From chapter 36-39, Isaiah shifts to prose to tell the ugly part of King Hezekiah's story.

Selfishness

King Hezekiah's Good Reign

We remember Hezekiah as a good king, one of the Jews' better kings.² He served the God of Israel and did not serve the false gods that so many of the other Jewish kings worshiped.

If you want to read about Hezekiah's righteous deeds, you will find them in 2 Kings 16-19. Here's a summary of his life.³

[2 Kings 18:5] He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel; and after him there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who came before him.

² Hezekiah was the good son of a wicked father (King Ahaz) and the good father of an exceptionally wicked son (King Manasseh).

³ He removed the "high places," sites set up on hilltops where people sacrificed to idols. He broke down sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah - objects used for idolatrous purposes. He destroyed the bronze serpent God told Moses to make that stemmed the plague of serpents (Numbers 21) Originally serving as an object to promote faith in God's salvation, by Hezekiah's day it was, itself, an idol. He also opposed the Philistines, an ancient enemy of Israel. He only partially defeated the Philistines, but he did show a resolve to purify the land.

[6] For he clung to the LORD; he did not desist from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses.

Here are a couple of Hezekiah highlights.

King Hezekiah Tested by Assyria's Might (Isaiah 36:1--37:38)

Putting his trust in God, Hezekiah had refused to pay protection money (also called "tribute") to Assyria.

It was like standing up to the bully at school and refusing to give him your lunch money, only at the international level. Not surprisingly, the bully, Assyria, sent an army to destroy the Jews.

After laying waste the northern kingdom of Israel, Assyria marched south to destroy Judah and the capitol city of Jerusalem.⁴

Hezekiah responded to the threat by turning to the Lord. He prayed.⁵ And the prophet Isaiah told Hezekiah that God would take care of the Assyrians.

In one night, the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 men of the Assyrian army that had camped outside the walls of Jerusalem.

And when King Sennacherib returned to Assyria, he was killed in a palace coup by two of his own sons.

Isaiah tells this story of God's powerful deliverance of the nation, a deliverance that was only possible by God's intervening power, prompted by Hezekiah's prayer.

But Isaiah's storytelling wasn't over. He went on to tell us how God blessed Hezekiah, personally, after the good king fell deathly ill.

⁴ The Assyrian general, Rabshekah, gave a threatening speech to frighten Hezekiah into surrender. That speech only prompted Hezekiah to seek God.

⁵ There is a very touching scene in which King Hezekiah laid out on the floor a threatening letter from the Assyrians before the Lord in the temple and said, "*Look, LORD, at their threats against us. Protect us!*"

King Hezekiah Tested by a Decree of Disease (Isaiah 38:1-22)

Prophecy of a soon-to-come death (v. 1)

[1] In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, came to him and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Set your house in order, for you are going to die and not live.'"

That was a crystal clear message from the Lord. But King Hezekiah did not want to die. He wanted to live.

So, we aren't surprised to read that he prayed fervently.

A prayer for God's healing (vv. 2-3)

[2] Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, [3] and said, "Please, LORD, just remember how I have walked before You wholeheartedly and in truth, and have done what is good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept profusely.

God listened to the king's prayer. The Lord spoke to Isaiah and Isaiah brought the word of the Lord back to Hezekiah.

God miraculously healed Hezekiah! (v. 5)

[5] "This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says, 'I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life.'"⁶

Wow! Talk about answered prayer! What an amazing story.

So, we have seen God's great blessings poured out on Hezekiah. God delivered Him from the Assyrian threat AND from a terminal disease.

⁶ God's promise that Hezekiah would live and not die was validated by a miracle. The sun's shadow backtracked ten steps on a stairway.

Isaiah will now tell one more story from Hezekiah's life. This is the ugly one.

King Hezekiah Tested by a Decree of Judgment (Isaiah 39:1-8)

Babylonians with a "Glad You're Well" visit (v. 1)

[1] At that time Berodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a gift to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.

After his miraculous recovery, the king received a visit from a delegation representing the ascending world power, the Babylonians.

They even brought Hezekiah a "You Got Well" present, which he greatly appreciated. And to show them how pleased he gave them the gift of seeing all the treasure of his kingdom.

Hezekiah's "show and tell" (v. 2)

[2] Hezekiah was pleased, and let them see all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the balsam oil, the excellent olive oil, his entire armory, and everything that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor in all his realm that Hezekiah did not let them see.

Hezekiah was not politically stupid. He skillfully navigated the nation through very turbulent times. But this, this was d-u-m-b. He should never have shown the Babylonians his great wealth.

His act was like an engraved invitation to Babylon to "come and get it."

When Isaiah heard what Hezekiah had done, he instantly saw the handwriting on the wall. He told the king how it was all going to play out.

The handwriting on the wall (vv. 5-7)

[5] Isaiah then said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD of armies, [6] 'Behold, the days are coming when everything that is

in your house, and what your fathers have stored up to this day, will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the LORD. [7] 'And some of your sons who will come from you, whom you will father, will be taken away; and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'"

What awful news - and it's awful in so many ways.

- Hezekiah's descendants - royal descendants of the line of David and Solomon - will be deported from the land of promise.
- His grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be exiled to Babylon.
- Babylon will take all of Hezekiah's wealth.
- They will loot the temple treasury.
- The city of Jerusalem and the land of Judah will be overthrown and destroyed.

The kingdom will be destroyed, and the destruction will come because of what King Hezekiah did when he showed Babylon his great treasure.

We can't imagine receiving worse news. But listen to the king's response.

It's all about me (?) (v. 8)

[8] Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." For he thought, "For there will be peace and truth in my days."

Hezekiah heard the news that the Kingdom of God was going to be torn apart. He heard that the Babylonian captivity was coming and that his descendants would be taken to Babylon and would suffer terribly.

He heard that all of that would occur AFTER he's dead and gone - and then concluded, "It's all good. If it's good for me, it's OK."

Hmmm...

Thinking about selfishness...

Selfishness: the tendency to act excessively or solely in a manner that benefits oneself, even if others are disadvantaged.

What grates on us in reading this from Hezekiah is it is a display of world class selfishness. And we see the king's selfishness here in a couple of ways.

First, that he was solely concerned for himself.
Second, he was wholly unconcerned about the welfare of either his descendants or God's kingdom.

You've heard that the smallest package in the world is a guy all wrapped up in himself. By that measure, Hezekiah's life looks like a pretty small package. He was being self-ish. Self-centered.

Throughout the Bible, there are lots of warnings against selfishness.⁷

Selfishness is bad. And while it may take a crisis to bring it to the surface, in the end, if we are selfish, that selfishness will become obvious.

If I'm selfish, when the chips are down, I'll run roughshod over you. My agenda is *"Me, first!"*

That's what we see in Hezekiah and his example stands as a warning to not be self-ish.

And now I'm going to throw you a curve...

In November of 1999 I was in Russia (with Todd Havekost), in the province of Tatarstan, the town of Nizhnekamsk. We were teaching a class on sermon preparation to a class of Russian preachers.

In this session, I was trying to make a point about the importance of working hard to make proper word choice when bringing a message from God's Word.

So, I turned to one of my favorite muses, Mark Twain, who had made a comment in one of his works that the difference between "the almost right word" and the "right word" is the difference between "lightning" and "a lightning bug."

I said that, in English, waiting for the translator to render my sentence into Russian.

He - a VERY savvy translator who had great familiarity with American culture - just looked at me as if to say, *"You're kidding, right?"*

What I had said about lightning and lightning bugs made sense in English. It made no sense in Russian.

The translator and I laughed about it later. But the point I was trying to make was worth making.

It is important to be precise in our speech. Words make a difference. And every word has its own meaning.

Different words - even words that sound similar - can have vastly different meanings.

For instance, some *"self-..."* words, like *"self-centered"* mean almost the same thing as *self-ish*. Others, like *"self-control"* have different and good meanings.

There is another *"self-..."* word that is not bad at all. In fact, without using the word, Jesus repeatedly appealed to the concept to motivate us to follow Him and to serve.

The "self" word I have in mind is "self-interest" and while the two words - "selfishness" and "self-interest" - sound similar, they are as different as "lightning" and "lightning bug."

Self-Interest

⁷ See Proverbs 23:6, 7; James 3:14.

Jesus - and Self-Interest

Jesus was the most loving Man who ever lived, and He had a lot to say about selfishness. He condemned it.

But Jesus also had a lot to say about acting out of self-interest, and He NEVER condemned that. In fact, I'm going to now do something that I rarely do.

I'm going to simply read from the Bible words direct from the direct from the lips of Jesus, where we hear Him speak to the theme of you and me acting out of self-interest.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urged His followers to act in their self-interest by seeking God's reward when it came to...

...godly character (Matthew 5:3-12)

[Matthew 5:3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[4] "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

[5] "Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth.

[6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

[7] "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

[8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

[9] "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

[10] "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[11] "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. [12]

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

...giving to the poor (Matthew 6:2-4)

[Matthew 6: 2] "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they will be seen by people. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. [3] "But when you give to the poor, do

not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, [4] so that your charitable giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

...praying (Matthew 6:5-6)

[Matthew 6:5] "And when you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by people. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. [6] "But as for you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

...fasting (Matthew 6:16-18)

[Matthew 6:16] "Now whenever you fast, do not make a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they distort their faces so that they will be noticed by people when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. [17] "But as for you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face [18] so that your fasting will not be noticed by people, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

...storing up treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20)

[Matthew 6:19] "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. [20] "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal.

...seeking FIRST God's Kingdom (Matthew 6:33)

[Matthew 6:33] "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you.

Jesus also urged us to act in our own self-interest and to seek God's reward by...

...helping the needy/thirsty (Matthew 10:42)

[Matthew 10:42] "And whoever gives one of these little ones just a cup of cold water to drink in the name of a disciple, truly I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."

...losing our lives for His sake (Matthew 16:24-25)

[Matthew 16:24] Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me. [25] "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."⁸

...giving up riches in this life (Mark 10:28-30)

[Mark 10:28] Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and have followed You." [29] Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, [30] but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life."⁹

...loving our enemies (Luke 6:35)

[Luke 6:35] "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you

will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil people.¹⁰

You get the point.

Jesus wants to motivate us to pray, give, and serve Him by the reward He promises...a reward which we do not now see, because...to be motivated by what we can't see requires faith - and God loves it when He sees our faith.

Not only is there nothing wrong with doing something for a reward from God, there is everything RIGHT with it.

In Hebrews 11, the author writes, ***[6] And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for the one who comes to God must believe that He exists and that He proves to be the One who rewards those who seek Him.***

Our rewarding God wants us to want the reward that He will give us for living for Him here and now.

Serving, You, and Self-Interest - to the Glory of God

Serving - and eternal reward

The Bible says that a life of prayer, generosity, and service is the best life there is. And the Bible says that our faithfulness here in this life will determine the reward we will receive in Heaven.

Now, lest there be a misunderstanding, our works have nothing to do with becoming a child of God, receiving eternal life, or being justified before God. That is all of grace! (Ephesians 2:8-9)

But for those who have been saved by grace, when it comes to our service, our love, our generosity, our outreach, Jesus and those who wrote our New Testaments are all on the same page: This life counts!

⁸ See also Mark 8:35-36 and Luke 9:23-24.

⁹ See also Matthew 19:27-29 and Luke 18:28-30.

¹⁰ See also Luke 14:12-14.

It is in your self-interest to serve God, both for eternity's sake and for the here-and-now.

Serving - and peace / fulfillment here and now

I'm so inspired by you here who serve Jesus in such a rich variety of ways.

You serve Jesus in your home. You serve Jesus in ways that touch our broader community in which we live. You serve Jesus in ministries here that help us, as a church, fulfill our stewardship to God.

I've asked leaders of three of our more "people-intensive" ministries to prepare 60-second videos for your viewing pleasure this morning.

Jennifer Robison (who leads English as a Second Language), Liz Miller (who is on the Children's Ministry team), and Jacob Rusch who leads our Praise Team and Technology Team) will tell you a bit about what their ministry is all about, what are some of the blessings of being involved in their ministries, and how you could get involved.

Video presentation:

Jennifer Robison - English as a Second Language

Liz Miller - Children's Ministry

Jacob Rusch - Praise Team and Technology Team

You can contact Jennifer, Liz, or Jacob if you can see yourself serving in any of these ministries.

And there are many other ways to serve Jesus here. You can find contact information in the weekly program or on the church website.

Conclusion:

There is not one of us here today who wants to leave behind a Hezekiah legacy. We don't want anyone thinking, "*Yeah, I know Dave. Really selfish. Cares only about himself.*"

No! We want to lead the beautiful life of dependence on God, generosity, and service. We want to help those coming after us to flourish. We want our lives to be gifts to a needy world - in Jesus' Name.

THAT is the life we long for.

It is a privilege beyond words - a great reward! - to know that your service is making Kingdom-of-God sized difference in the lives of others. That difference makes all the difference.

Being God's instrument of grace in the world brings purpose and meaning to your life. Yes, in this life, it is best for you to serve Jesus.

He also promises that in some way yet to be fully defined, He will richly reward you for having served Him here on earth, when you are with Him, there, in glory.

So, my friends. By all means, serve!

As the Apostle Paul assures us, ***[1 Corinthians 15:58] Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be firm, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.***