

An Unselfish Heart

A Sermon by Pr. David Johnson

As our Thursday evening Bible Study group has been studying the 9th chapter of Daniel, it's been hard to understand the complete brokenness and humility of Daniel. Oh, he spends a lot of time focused on the loving, patient character of God, juxtaposed to the absolute vile condition of Israel's heart. But he doesn't stop with Israel, Daniel includes himself in the litany of offensive people for whom he must repent. And even though there isn't a word spoken against him in the entire book, Daniel still seems to understand that compared to the holy perfection of God, he shares the same wicked nature as his countrymen.

No, Daniel doesn't come to God claiming any kind of exemption for his own personal righteousness. On the contrary, he throws himself on the "mercy of the court." He submits himself, and his people, to God's perfect character which had already shown immeasurable goodness, patience, and enduring compassion. Daniel chose the way of humility and unselfishness, when he had every human right to appeal to God on the basis of his own personal track-record.

Seeing this kind of attitude in Daniel reminds me of a line from one of my favorite movies, *The Ghosts of Dickens' Past*:

"Getting beyond our own needs takes thought and effort and, above all, an unselfish heart."

This is the kind, though difficult instruction given by a wise, fictional little friend of author, Charles Dickens.

You see, what many don't realize, is that Charles Dickens was himself the victim of forced child labor, and the cruel hardships of that era. Many at that time lived hand to mouth, begging in the streets, forced to eke out a living doing whatever they could just to survive. Unemployment was rampant, and the "haves" were by and large, devoid of any concern for the "have not's" in society. A general moral apathy had crept over the culture.

Along with this decline in social morals, there was a decline in foundational religious values as well. Or, maybe it would be more accurate to say that the latter led to the prior. The industrial revolution had left society with a utilitarian view of man, leaving a person only worth what they could benefit the community. Sound familiar? At least they didn't compost their dead.

In this time just prior to the American Second Great Awakening, church attendance in Europe had also declined, and those who did attend, to a great extent, failed to see any daily application for what was preached from the pulpit. God's Word had become just so much philosophy; to be heard and politely discussed, but rarely believed or applied to everyday life. After all, there were more important matters to attend to, more pertinent and personally beneficial issues to address. Survival for one.

But when you read the text of Jeremiah (which we're told Daniel was doing at the beginning of chapter 9), you find a very similar environment. The Israelites had long since lost their respect for God and His Word. False gods in the form of wood, stone, gold, and personal gain had replaced the worship of the one true God. The priorities of devotion and service had been abandoned eons ago, and replaced with selfish, self-serving pursuits. The fat got fatter, and the starving, well they died.

But not without God's notice. He had seen these atrocities and warned, through various prophets, what was to come if drastic changes didn't take place. But the hearts of God's people had grown cold and indifferent. They closed their ears to God's exhortations and murdered the messengers who dared bring such "intolerant" and "unloving" announcements. Eventually, God's patience ran out, and the judgment which had been promised came to pass; both Israel and Judah were exiled.

Daniel 9:13-14 As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come on us; yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our iniquity and giving attention to Your truth. ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord has kept the calamity in store and brought it on us; for the Lord our God is righteous with respect to all His deeds which He has done, but we have not obeyed His voice.

But God had two purposes for this banishment: the redemption of his beloved people, and the improvement of a foreign land. We see both displayed in Jeremiah 29, a message Daniel may have been reading in ch.9:

Jer 29:11 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. 12 'Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 'You will seek Me and find {Me} when you search for Me with all your heart. 14 'I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'

These verses share with such clarity, God's desire for each of His children (both by blood and by adoption). He desires good for his people, not catastrophe; hope and not despair. He wants His people to know and experience the kind of perfect union and relationship that can only be experienced when the servant submits to the Master, and one's only obsession is to better serve one's Lord. When these elements are aligned, the blessings obtained are immeasurable and eternal.

Yes, God never forgets the plans He has for His children, but He also has a desire to see the lost and wandering people of the world find this same transformation. Such was God's desire for the people of Babylon as well, and He explains this in the verses just preceding vs.11:

Jeremiah 29:4-10 "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, ⁵ 'Build houses and live in them; and plant gar-

dens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. ⁷ Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.’ ⁸ For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. ⁹ For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,’ declares the Lord. ¹⁰ “For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.(see Gen. 12:1-3; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8)

In this brief letter, sent by Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon, several points are clearly defined:

- a. Don’t blame the Babylonians. God is behind this difficult experience. (v.4)
- b. Settle in. Get comfortable. Accept where you are for now. You’re going to be there for a while. (v.5-6)
- c. Procreation, the first step to social reform. (v.6b)
- d. Bloom where you’re planted. Apply your faith. Improve your culture. Pray for the good of the nation. (v.7a)
- e. Focusing on the needs of others, will result in personal blessing (which is a byproduct, not a goal). (v.7b)
- f. Godly discretion will reveal the preachers in your midst for what they really are; false prophets. Don’t listen to them.

The apostle James seems to echo this instruction as he wrote his epistle, though he used different terminology:

James 1:22-27 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. ²⁶ If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. ²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The people of Israel were guilty of doing exactly what James warned against. They had looked briefly into the *text* of the Law, as in a passing mirror. But they failed to pause long enough to really evaluate its significance or its application. They heard the words, probably week after week; but never responded to its challenge or instruction. And in the end, God gave them 70 years to practice both. *(As a point of reference, it was 70 years from the Russian revolution to its collapse)*

I believe we’re on the verge of a similar event. America has become much like the people of Israel just prior to the exile. We’ve become spiritually apathetic and socially disconnected. We’ve absorbed the same disposable, utilitarian view of life which consumed the society in Dickens’ day. And like Israel, we’ve ceased to be concerned about the “welfare of the city,” to say nothing of working for “its” good rather than our own.

Jeremiah wrote, “... plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.” I’m absolutely convinced that those are still God’s desires for His children; past, present, and future. But much of the fulfillment of those plans will come during the process of, and following, our submissive and obedient response to His commands. (As our Bible Study group has seen in Daniel)

“Getting beyond our own needs takes thought and effort and, above all, an unselfish heart.”

“...prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves...Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Until we’re willing to live as His children, He can’t bless us as such.