



All Selfishness Aside

Psalm 32:1-7; John 10:1-11; Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25

In *All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*¹ Robert Fulghum pointed out that the deep lessons in life are truly simple ones. Share. Play nicely. Everyone helps with clean up. Don't fight. Wait your turn. Don't be greedy. There is enough for everyone. Why is it that as adults we suddenly don't believe the lessons from our Kindergarten years? Is it any different with Sunday School and adult faith in Christ? Have we actually learned the basic lessons of faith, or do we just quote them back verbatim?

How many of us at some point learned to quote Psalm 23 by heart? Does it really say that God will provide pasture, water, and protection for us in the same way a shepherd cares for the sheep? Does it really say that God will care for us in the presence of our enemies? Does it really say we need not fear evil? Why, then, do we not live as though these lessons were true?

We want the gospel to tell us that nothing will go wrong for the people of God. This is an attractive gospel caricature. Many large churches have grown simply because they exude and preach a message of material success. Is that a true picture of the gospel? What we really want is to hear that faith in Christ is actually more selfish than living by any other creed! That's the idea, isn't it? If you really want to succeed at selfishness, be faithful at all costs, and you may selfishly enjoy the most heavenly of all rewards! The most rewarding greed comes through being unselfish! Why is that concept so attractive? How can it be attractive and repulsive at the same time?

Perhaps it just overlooks the obvious. Jesus did not live selfishly. He lived purposefully. He did not come as shepherd to care for selfish interests, but to lay down his own interests on behalf of lost and struggling sheep. Jesus said he came to grant abundant life. That is not the same as selfish, greedy living. This life is in our best interest, but the problem is that selfish aims and greedy motives run counter to the aims and quality of this abundant living.

When Jesus speaks of being the shepherd and the sheepfold gate, he speaks of calling his sheep by name to follow him in action, character, and example. He came in part to show us a different quality of living. This is a living with purpose beyond ourselves and selfish issues. While it may have our ultimate best interests at heart, that is a distraction to the quality of this abundant living. In following the voice of Jesus into green pastures, we cannot divorce Jesus' words and aims from the example of his own living. To do so is to misunderstand the fullness of the life to which we are called. It is to ignore Kindergarten lessons of basic faith: selfishness is neither faith nor love. Loving others is the base of gospel living.

This is what the believers were grappling with in Acts 2. They had heard the message of Jesus. They had received the gospel and were living an appropriate expression of Jesus' message and example of living. They were trusting God to supply their needs as they met the needs of one another. Faith gave them assurance of God's provision. Faith granted assurance that they could afford to faithfully care for others. God would meet their needs, so they were free to set all selfishness aside and love one another as God in Christ had loved them.

¹ Fulghum, Robert. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things*. New York: Villard Books, 1988.
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Faith changed the lives of these new believers. They set aside their selfishness in various ways. It was not only about material possessions. They set aside their selfish pursuits and use of time as well. They gathered together in recognition that in the bond of faith community there was something compelling about this new life in Christ. While there were personal issues to claim their attention, they saw that living as a community of faith allowed them to express the love of Christ in ways that living in selfish isolation did not.

It is easier to be selfless when the larger body is and extension of family. It is simpler to live in love assurance of God's care when as community of faith we share one another's burdens. It is easier to be less self-absorbed when we make the time to participate in the life of the large body of faith. When Jesus speaks of sheep, he points to their coming together as a flock. It is only in shared fellowship that an individual's needs can be fully met, for part of those needs are communal. It is here that abundant living can be realized.

Why then, do we seek isolation, separation, and the narrowing of our community boundaries? Is it not because we fear the response and reaction of others? Our tendency is to distrust others for living under the same standards of selfishness that would direct our own steps. Is God's provision and care sufficient to overcome concerns of rejection and mistreatment by others?

Once again, Kindergarten faith reminds us of God's unlimited power and unending love. We know the stories. We can recite them. The problem is that the stories are not sufficiently reflected in our daily living. We claim knowledge of the truth, but to what extent do we allow it to set us free?

It is hard not to be selfish when we are anxious. It is difficult to be selfless when we are worried. When we feel secure and safe, that is when we are most comfortable being selfless. Confidence in God's care and provision allows for the freedom to accept the validity of those Kindergarten lessons about trust, sharing, and loving one another. That only happens when we take our eyes off ourselves to refocus our attention on God and others.

That is what Luke was describing in that beautiful picture of Acts 2. The believers set all selfishness aside as they focused their attention on Christ and growing together as the flock of God. That did not mean that all problems disappeared. Persecution, rejection, and suffering were near at hand. As Peter later reminded those of the Diaspora, we were called beyond selfish concerns to emulate the example of Christ Jesus. As Christ suffered, trusting yet in God's provision, so we are to lift our focus from selfish concerns to the purpose of living for God and others.

Setting personal concerns aside, Jesus trusted God. Setting personal concerns aside, believers in Acts 2 lived for the benefit of the larger body. Setting selfish concerns aside, we are challenged to trust God, even in the midst of adversity, when it is hardest to be selfless.

In the final analysis, we are called to do as those we consider our heroes. They are the ones who actually accepted and followed through, not on the difficult topics of faith, but the simple ones. Love one another. Share. Play nicely. Be part of God's provision for others. Don't worry. We have been redeemed in order to redeem others. Don't be selfish. Trust the One who loved enough to lay down his own life that we might live abundantly. Do we trust these lessons enough to set aside all our selfish concerns, becoming heroes simply by living the truths we claim?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*