

POGO

Pleasing Ourselves - Godless Objective

Some of you will remember the cartoon strip named Pogo. About a half century ago, back in the fifties, a favorite comic strip of many people was about an assortment of animals living in Florida's Okefenokee Swamp. The cartoonist, Walt Kelly, referred to them as "nature's schreechers." By the way, this is **not** the Gospel according to Pogo.

We will, instead, be looking at what the Gospel says about Pleasing Ourselves.

Walt Kelly did that comic strip for about 20 years before his death in 1973. The most famous quote from all of that 20 year history was created by Kelly in 1971 as part of an Earth Day Emphasis and its subject was related to littering. You probably have seen this quote:
"We have met the enemy and he is us."

Some of you are probably thinking "That ain't good English." There was **not** a whole lot of what Walt Kelly wrote in that comic strip that could be called "good English" but it communicated in its own way. If there were a "Gospel According to Pogo," then this quote would be a key verse. In fact, "We have met the enemy and he is us" sums up a lot of the message of the New Testament. Admittedly, Walt Kelly did not have a "spiritual message" or agenda in this particular saying. However, each of us could apply this idea to ourselves and the internal spiritual warfare – that life-long inner struggle against those soul-destroying tendencies we have variously called passions, desires, or whatever.

These are emotions that are generated in that part of us we loosely refer to as SELF. If these tendencies and desires are left unchecked and we do not **properly** deal with them, then we find that we are enslaved to the demigod of self that winds up on the throne of our lives. And we wind up working in order to bring endless offerings of sacrifices to satisfy the insatiable appetite of that demigod that is on the throne.

The problem is that SELF is never satisfied and the more we try to satisfy it, the more enslaved we become to debt and materialism, to seeking after fame and popularity, to trying to control everything and everybody around us. It never gets any better. It is somewhat akin to borrowing money to pay off debt - most of us realize that is a downward spiral into the abyss of bankruptcy.

Often we do not realize that trying to appease self is a no-win situation and we end up in the Abyss of Self Importance. We think we can control the demigod of self by educating it and civilizing it. What we wind up with is a stronger, better educated and more socially-acceptable demigod on the throne of our lives. And yet, despite the education and civilization, we are still enslaved. We can identify with the plaintiff plea from song that Tennessee Ernie Ford sang back in the 1950's – "16 Tons" - we are just "another day older and deeper in debt" or, in this case, deeper into the abyss of self importance.

As a society and culturally we have tended to think that if we can just better educate and better civilize humanity that humanity will improve and become better and better. That is nothing more than thinly veiled "humanism." That idea has been around since mankind has been around. This misconception about what civilization can do for us is not new. About 100 years ago S. L. Clemens wrote the following in the "Papers of the Adam Family."

[Ours] is a civilization which has destroyed the simplicity and repose of life; replaced its contentment, its poetry, its soft romance-dreams and visions with the money-fever, sordid

ideals, vulgar ambitions, and the sleep which does not refresh; it has invented a thousand useless luxuries, and turned them into necessities; it has created a thousand vicious appetites and satisfies none of them; it has dethroned God and set up the shekel [materialism] in His place.

What Mark Twain may not have realized was that materialism (as well as fame or control) is just an outward manifestation of what Walt Kelly referred to as US and what the writers of the New Testament referred to as SELF.

In the past decade or more, we have see an increasing interest and emphasis on self esteem and its importance concerning a person being able to function in a world where relationships with others are essential. We cannot think of many situations in which interpersonal relationship are not essential. It could be in family, work, church, school, or the neighborhood. A balanced perspective of self, an understanding of basic human needs regarding self, and a knowledge of what our Creator intended for us can help us function effectively in whatever culture we may find ourselves.

There are cultural influences regarding acceptable ways an individual may express himself. In Western societies, the individual is encouraged to “standout” and to seek recognition. Most of us would have a sense of joy and importance (pride) if we were singled out and individually honored for an achievement. In Eastern societies, such recognition would be an embarrassment to the person. Group recognition would be acceptable and welcomed but not individual recognition. Such differences find expression in the way the societies conduct business. A Western culture business meeting might typically be dominated by one or two people who would be attempting to express their ideas and sell them to the group. In an Eastern culture business meeting, the participants are very careful to not promote their opinions but to seek a consensus. The issues of “self” are present in both situations. In the former, the issues are centered around the individual. In the latter, the issues are there; however, they are focused on the group. Pride is still there as well as the desire to dominate and be recognized; however, it is a group dynamic at work.

RECOGNIZING BASIC HUMAN NEEDS REGARDING SELF.

There are four basic human drives and these are all natural. Self-Preservation, Self-Reproduction, Self-Recognition, and Self-Power.

The first and most basic is **self-preservation**. This is our survival instinct at work. This drive causes us to get out of the way of an onrushing car. We don’t want to die. For Christians, we may be ready for eternity, but may have the same attitude as Bob Harrington (the Chaplain of Bourbon Street) who said, “I’m ready to go, I just don’t particularly want to be in the next load.” This drive could also lead to such things as materialism, hoarding things, bigger house, two jobs, building bigger barns.

Once we have satisfied the first basic drive, our attention can then be focused on the second level of our needs, **self-reproduction**. This drive has been channeled into a number of expressions:

- Family situation where the next generation is nurtured
- It is also used to motivate people to seek recruits for their political party or
- To convert someone to their way of thinking

The third level need is **self-recognition**. This is basically seeking the approval of others. A person who is driven by this need requires attention and feedback to confirm that what they are doing is the right thing.

The fourth basic drive is **self-power**. The issues here are prestige and position. This need is sometimes exploited in contrived job titles. Some might call the janitor “vice-president of custodial care.” Other issues may involve “control” in interpersonal relationships. We see this dynamic in families all the time. Who is in control? One result of the fall of mankind is that people want power - it infects children as well as adults. How many of you know families where the children are in control. Many husbands and wives struggle with this issue all the time. Dysfunctionality in families finds its root source in this very issue.

Christians need to recognize these basic “natural” needs of humanity. It helps us understand why people behave the way they do. **UNDERSTANDING IS NOT ENOUGH! WHAT DO WE DO WITH THESE ISSUES - HOW DO WE HANDLE THEM??**

Relative to the way we (as Christians) are to live, **we need to hear what Jesus said about these matters**. Let’s take them one at a time.

SELF PRESERVATION: Jesus said “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” (Matt 10:39) This paradoxical statement refers to the work of the cross in the life of the believer. As we identify with Christ in His death on the cross and His resurrection, we die to our old nature and experience a new birth in our spirits. This is the starting point.

The continuing (on-going) work in our lives is described in Luke 9:23, “And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” We are to take up our cross daily (for every situation) and follow Jesus by denying (dying to) self in practical ways. We are familiar with 1Corinthians 13 where Paul gives us a number of example of how “denying self” finds expression in our interpersonal relationships. This God-kind of love can only happen as we die to self. How else could you not take offense when we are hurt? How else can we forgive others and do not insist on our own way. This is how turning the other cheek and going the second mile works out in everyday life situations. (We make a mistake to consider these teachings of Jesus to be only an idealized, theoretical way of living - it is the way He desires for us to live.)

It helps me to remember the words of Romans 8:28-29. These verses remind us that everything that comes our way is there to “transform us into the image of Jesus.” However, we must cooperate with the Holy Spirit as “God works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.” (Phil 2:13)

SELF REPRODUCTION: In Matthew 23:15 we find these words of Jesus. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.”

This kind of activity is still happening today. There are groups that call themselves churches but deny the truth of the gospel message. They invite others to join them and become as they are. Many do join and they think they are OK because they are members of that group and they perform certain duties and rituals. This is nothing more than salvation by works and we know that does not work. We know that salvation by works only strengthens SELF and is just the opposite of what God is trying to accomplish in us. No wonder Jesus said - “Woe to you Pharisees”

We see in John 3:3 and 3:5 the pivotal teaching of Jesus of the necessity of being born again (not

of flesh but of the Spirit. The Pharisees had never learned the absolute necessity of being born again of the Spirit of God before they can even “see the Kingdom of Heaven.” This “new birth” is the “reproduction” that God is interested in.) He wants Christ to be formed in us as Paul shared with the churches of Galatia in Galatians 4:19.

SELF RECOGNITION: Dealing with the issue of “approval of others” is a difficult area. We desperately want to be accepted. This is the driving force of “peer pressure.” Much of what we do is done with the hope of winning approval from friends, family or even strangers. Often we don’t even consider the rightness or wrongness of our action but consider only what someone may think of us.

The Lord Jesus had advice for us in this area. In Matthew 5:16 He said “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your **good works**, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” Notice that Jesus did **not** say, “that they may see YOU doing good works . . .” Therefore, our motivation is not what people will think of us, but we must be driven by consideration of how the act will glorify God. The simplest way to accomplish this is to be discreet in our actions. Another way to say this is to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. (We should want approval from God only.)

SELF POWER

Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. (Matt 20:20-25 NIV)

Prestige and fame were the things that caused the mother of James and John to ask Jesus to grant that her two sons sit on either side of Him when He came into His Kingdom. The need for self power is seen in a “me-first” and “mine is better” attitude.

This attitude is contrary to the nature of Jesus. In Matthew 20:26 and 27 He said “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first (chief) must be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Greatness is achieved in being a servant. Being Chief requires the devotion and commitment of a slave. Consider Jesus: He came to Serve (actions of a servant) AND to give His life (dedication of a slave).

A vast difference exists between the natural way of man and the supernatural way of God. The natural man exalts self. The child of God sees self in a completely different light. The power of selfishness is a foe whose hidden strength is something we need to be on guard against.

SELF is the reason we must experience the “cross” before we experience the “resurrection.” Unless we die to self, we cannot expect to have the Lord Jesus living in us. Jesus told His disciples in John 10:10, “I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.” He also told them in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life . . .” These statements help us understand the apparent paradox of “dying (to self) so that we might live (in Christ).”

What will it be? Will we go for the natural human drives of self preservation, self reproduction, self recognition and self power or will we opt for God plan of dying to self so that we can experience the life of Christ? **IT IS YOUR CHOICE!**

Some of you have never taken the initial step of identifying with the death of Christ on the Cross and His resurrection. This is critically important. It has eternal significance. Nothing else matters in this life.

Some of you have taken that first step. You have been born again of the Spirit of God, you are a child of God, but you may not be dealing with these daily - moment by moment - choices of pleasing self or pleasing God. Are you taking up your cross **DAILY** and following Jesus?

We started with **POGO** and Pleasing Ourselves - Godless Objective. This **POGO** is not very good. Just as our lives can be transformed from being like Adam to being like Christ, we can transform **POGO** into something good. Pleasing Our God Only.