

Being Selfish with the Gospel

Our societies' obsession with matters of "self" becomes apparent by just opening the dictionary. There are, in the volume I consulted, nearly two and a half pages of words devoted to "self." Narcissism and "selfishness" become the natural conclusions of such a pre-occupation. "Selfish" is an adjective defined as being "concerned chiefly or only with oneself without regard for the well-being of others;" and "selfishness" is merely the noun form of acting "selfishly." But our title suggests that there are ways in which we can be selfish "with the Gospel." Let's consider a few of them. We can be **selfish with the Gospel by...**

Assuming it was written to us. It wasn't. Jesus went about "*in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom...*" Matthew 4:23. And, the inspired writers of the New Testament wrote "*the Lord's commandment,*" 1Corinthians 14:37 (see also Ephesians 3:3-5). But, the gospel message was written to Jews and Gentiles of the first century, not the twenty-first one. Don't get ahead of me on this point! Certainly the gospel *applies* to us today, and it absolutely was written *for* us. However, the same thing is true for every other generation from the first century to this one and beyond as long as God allows time to continue. But if we assume the gospel message was written *to* us, and therefore addresses our specific challenges and problems directly and specifically to the exclusion of its *original* audience, we're going to have extreme difficulty correctly interpreting and applying parts of its message. It was written *to* people of the late first and early second centuries. Unless we interpret the gospel in and with this context, much of its teaching and benefit will elude us. My point? The gospel is written *for* us, but not *to* us. If we selfishly assume it is "all about us"- especially to exclusion of its *original* audience, we will never really understand, let alone correctly understand and apply, it. "*But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God,*" 2Peter 1:20-21.

Just eating it ourselves. The gospel is presented as "*the seed*" of the kingdom, cf. Luke 8:11ff. Think about that. If we content ourselves with selfishly just *eating* the seed rather than *sowing* it, a couple of things are likely to result: 1) we're going to become spiritually "fat" through our selfish laziness without the proper exercise gained through the activity of *sowing*; and, 2) there won't be any real *harvest* because we only *ate* the seed! Again, please don't get ahead of me. Of course we should *long for* and *consume* the Word of God in all of its manifestations- as *milk* for the newborn, 1Peter 2:1-2; as well as *meat* for the mature, Hebrews 5:12-14. But if we *only* consume *the seed* ourselves, rather than *sowing it beside the road, on the rocky ground, on the thorny ground, and on the good ground*, then the bountiful *harvest* of *thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold* will never occur, cf. Matthew 13:23. Seed is also for *sowing* to the benefit others, not just selfishly consuming for ourselves.

Expecting or demanding that it meets "my" desires. The gospel is *for* me, but not *just* me. It is for *everyone*, Romans 1:16-17. But we can become, if we're not careful, very selfish in these regards. We can expect it to cater to our own selfish desires and expectations. This is manifested in multiple ways: 1) I can expect the gospel to "solve" all "my" problems- financial, familial, career, lifestyle, etc.; or, 2) I can expect the presentation (preaching or bible class) of the gospel to be according to "my" needs, desires, or preferences. First of all, the gospel (adherence to it) may well further complicate some of "my" problems rather than solve them, cf. Luke 6:20-38; 14:26-35. The gospel was given to save souls- not to make lives a utopian "heaven on earth." And secondly, when I selfishly expect that the gospel message to be delivered to me in the way that "I" like, and that it addresses the needs or problems that "I" desire, it may

well be that it misses the same objectives for everyone else in the audience. It is a great challenge indeed for preachers and teachers of the Word to provide *milk* to the *immature* and *meat* to the *mature* all in the same sermon or class study. So, the *immature* sometimes are called upon to be patient while the *mature* are given some *meat*, and the *mature* likewise must be patient while the *immature* are provided *milk*. But if each or both is selfish about it, dissatisfaction and problems result.

Being overly concerned with “self” and “my” perceived needs, wants, or expectations with regard to the gospel certainly seems to be contrary to the teaching and example of its Author. *“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others,”* Philippians 2:3-4.

Let's be and do better, shall we? (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)