



*Open up your
heart and let the
sunshine in.*

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Pastor's Pen:

Prepare Ye The Way of the Lord: Learning Spiritual Warfare Part IV

Of the secular stories associated with the Christmas Season, Charles Dicken's, "A Christmas Carol" is one of the more popular. The central figure is a hardened heart miser named Ebenezer Scrooge. As the story unfolds, we see a man who allowed the sorrow he faced in his life to close his heart to those around him and to accumulate for the sake of accumulation. Neither he nor anyone else received joy from his life. His hardened heart was an act of revenge against the God and the world. Over the course of the story, as he sees the consequences his hardness of heart wreaks on others and himself, he has a conversion experience in which the coldness of his heart is tinged with empathy.

Life can harden us to the needs of others. Another powerful weapon in the devil's arsenal is the weapon of selfishness. Selfishness closes our hearts to the needs of others. It so puts the focus on the individual that they become callous to the harm their actions cause others or the harm their neglect causes others. Selfishness isolates us from God. It is a wholesale rejection of God, in fact.

The poison of selfishness

Selfishness is a poison that infects every organ of the person. It comes in the form of greed that builds a inordinate sense of what is needed in our lives. It is a product of a fear that tells us we will have to suffer want if we do not hoard for ourselves. The poison deepens from greed to gluttony where wanting the world is not enough, possessing it even to creating want in others becomes necessary. If we cannot be successful in gluttony, the poison finds another way to infect us: jealousy and envy. Selfishness provokes us to resent the good of others; to resent their belongings, their relationships, their health, and their talents.

Passively, selfishness leads to resentment. The person of Ebenezer Scrooge is a modern day example of the ugliness such a passive selfishness looks like. The main sin is that of neglect. You'll notice that such a person always has an excuse for their neglect. Actively, selfishness leads the person to actions meant to rebalance the perceived imbalance: theft, gossip, fraud, and such. These sins are done in the name of evening the score. A greedy and gluttonous heart knows no end to their fury. There is never enough. Two aberrations of this sin, abusing the widow and orphan and withholding the wages of the worker, are seen as so heinous in the Scriptures that they are considered sins that cry out for vengeance to God.

This poison will infect our decision making ability. It will justify every act as correct. I won't help that person, for example, because they make foolish decisions, or they hurt me, or they are lesser than me, or ...or...or ...or.... Selfishness knows no end to the excuses and justifications for neglect and abuse.

The Consequences of Selfishness

Ebenezer Scrooge has the benefit of being able to see the consequences of his selfishness. He sees the effect it has on the Cratchits, to Belle, the effect it has on his community, and inevitably on himself. It is a dark picture. Should we be so lucky to see the effects of our selfishness! We shouldn't need to be visited by four ghosts for such a revelation.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we have the Last Judgement Sequence, in which the difference between the righteous and the damned falls upon whether they were selfish or not. Those on the right saw the plight of those around them and helped. That selflessness of heart (empathy) is a reflection of Christ Himself. The damned are damned because of their coldness of heart. They saw the same need and did nothing. Selfishness has its eternal cost.

Our willingness and ability to put ourselves second or even last is a hallmark of the Christian life. This is why the Church and the Gospel put such a premium on detachment from the world and attachment to the life of God's love. If the devil uses selfishness as weapon, God gives us the armor and weapons to fight it!

Fighting Selfishness

Our main armor against selfishness is the virtues of love and temperance. Temperance is the virtue by which we learn to temper the excess of greed and gluttony. Temperance gives us the ability to be disciplined in our use of the things of this world. Love gives us the ability to see the needs of others and act positively. Love tempers the excesses of enabling or condoning bad behavior. Love looks to the needs of the other and selflessly intercedes for the other.

The weapons? It starts with thanksgiving. The more we cultivate a sense of thanksgiving, the more we see the blessing and movement of God in our lives. Thanksgiving beats back the want of greed and gluttony by showing us our wants are not as we think. Thanksgiving leads to a sense of stewardship, the next weapon in the arsenal that God gives us.

Stewardship forces us to look at the correct use of every aspect of our lives. How do I use what God gives me? Do I hoard it and not? Do I use what is given to build up only myself or those around me as well? Stewardship gives a sense of whether we are properly using what we have. In multiple parables, Jesus makes us aware that we are answerable for what we do with what we are given. Stewardship leads to another powerful weapon: generosity/magnanimity.

In generosity or magnanimity we strive to mimic God in our willingness to be gracious and selfless with who we are and what we possess. Magnanimity provokes off the couch and to visiting the sick, the lonely, or those who could better use such time. Generosity and magnanimity provoke us beyond excuses to ignore and to find reasons to be involved. A generous, thankful, magnanimous, and loving heart has no room for entitlement, greed, envy, jealousy, or gluttony! It has no room for selfishness.

Perhaps the greatest preparation we can do in this season of preparation of Advent is to repent of such selfishness and open our hearts in empathy and love in imitation of Christ. Why wait for visits from ghosts, like Scrooge, when the much easier and freeing action of repentance is always as close as the confessional?