

An Unselfish Life

John Botha, Willows Methodist Church, 2024-10-27

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Some of you follow our daily devotions, which Graeme started in our initial COVID-19 lock-down. At the moment they are done by a small group of people of which I am part, usually doing one or two a month. This sermon fits in with the devotions I have been doing since May, in a series titled ‘How Will They Know?’, which addresses the question of how people will come to know about Christ’s work of Salvation. I do not yet know how this series will conclude, but for now its focus is on how people will know that we are Christians. This sermon is a continuation of that series, as well as of my previous sermon of 11 August. There is one point from my previous sermon which I want to address before we get into the main part of today’s sermon.

How will people know that we are Christians? The answer is that we need to bear witness to our salvation. I could have said ‘We need to tell them,’ but there is more to it than speaking. We have two kinds of witness, our ...

- Explicit witness
- **Implicit witness**

... explicit witness, which is when we know that we are witnessing, and our implicit witness, which is when we don’t know that we are witnessing. I believe that our implicit witness has the greatest impact on others, because like it or not, others judge us all the time, seeing if we live up to what we say.

The thing is, while they will hardly ever share their conclusions with us, they will likely share them with others. This means that when we do scrape together enough courage to speak to someone about our faith, they may have already come to a conclusion based on what someone else said about us.

If our implicit witness does not align with our explicit witness, then our explicit witness will most likely at least be ignored, and at worst be disbelieved.

Put differently, people’s reaction will at least be something like ‘Well, there goes a hypocrite!’, or at worst something like ‘I could never believe that!’, which is bad. It is not not-good, or neutral — no, it is *bad* when our behaviour drives people away from Christianity, and I would not be surprised if one day we need to account for that. If how we behave makes a lie of what we say, then we *are* hypocrites, and the impact is enormous.

Today I want to look at one aspect of our behaviour which will will greatly impact our implicit witness, because even though most of our witnessing is done when we are unaware of it, we can still prepare to do that well.

I have already put up the sermon at

willows.org.za/sermons

and you can get the devotions at

willows.org.za/sermons
willows.org.za/devotions

My sermons and devotions are there in PDF form if you prefer to read rather than listen.

I am going to start with the same prayer I used in my previous sermon, because nothing has changed...

Dear Lord God,

I thank You for the awesome privilege of standing here before You and before Your children, my brothers and sisters in Christ. You alone know what has led up to this point, and I make this earnest request known to You — namely that You will use me to bring Your Word to this congregation of the Saints: those here now, as well as those listening, watching, or reading later. May I say all and only what You want me to say, and in the way you want me to say it. Amen.

Body

Quick detour

First, what might seem a quick detour. Although a great deal of what I have been focussing on is our behaviour, please understand that this is behaviour which results from our salvation, it is not behaviour which either leads to salvation, or which is to score brownie points with God. It is actions we do because of our faith. This is why James says in Chapter two that faith without works is dead.

That does not mean that you have lost your salvation, but 1 Corinthians 3:15 tells us concerning people's works that:

If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Is that how you would like to spend eternity? As one who only just managed to make it?

Our faith saves us, but as I explained previously, belief and faith are not the same. Belief has to do with something that can be (dis)proven, while faith has to do with what is outside the realm of proof. This is a really deep rabbit hole, so chat if you'd like to, but the essence is that there are things on which we cannot experiment, and then how we interpret what we can measure is formed by our paradigm.

Unselfishness

If you were to ask people to name a Christian in modern times whose life typifies Christian service, many would answer 'Mother Teresa'. If asked why, we'd probably hear

something along the lines of ‘She led a selfless life.’ That is a pithy way of putting it, but the core is actually that she was unselfish with herself. I want us to look a bit deeper into that today, which is why the sermon is titled:

An Unselfish Life

Thus far for five of the devotions in my current series I have used as major inspiration chapters from the book by Joel Manby, called *Love Works: Seven Timeless Principles for Effective Leaders*. I believe it is a very important book, because it addresses and debunks two common beliefs, firstly that you basically leave love at the door when you walk in at work, because secondly, if you do bring love into the workplace you will fail. Today I am drawing on Chapter six, titled *Unselfish: Think of Yourself Less*.

At the outset we need to clear up that being unselfish does not mean that you think *less of yourself*, but rather that you think *of yourself less*. You do not become a doormat or a rung on someone else’s ladder, but rather you look to everyone’s good, not just your own. When we all live that way, we all benefit.

Manby makes the point that there are three areas in our lives where we need to be unselfish: our treasure, our time, and our talent.

John Wimber put it well:

Show me where you spend your time, money and energy and I'll tell you what you worship.

Treasure

Yes, we’re talking here about money. That’s a touchy subject anywhere, and for some reason often very much so in Christian circles. Just see how popular you’d be if you suggest an external audit of a ‘Christian’ organisation’s finances. I put that in inverted commas, because it’s not the organisation that is Christian (or not), it is the *people*.

God has a great deal to say about money. According to an article in Christianity Today¹, there are more than 2,000 Bible verses about money! If you were to ask someone on the street to complete this quote from 1 Timothy 6:10...

For the love of money is

... many would say this:

For the love of money is the root of all evil.

Actually, *this* is how that sentence goes:

For the love of money is a root of **all kinds of evils**.
— See 1 Timothy 6:3–19

In fact, it is part of a longer section which starts at verse three and ends in verse 19, and which I recommend you read. Also, when you look at the Greek, what is rendered as ‘the love of money’ is a single word, which can also mean avarice or covetousness. It is thus more nuanced, but how we spend our money is a big, big sign.

¹ What Does the Bible Say about Money?, <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/what-does-the-bible-say-about-money.html>

Time

The next biggie is how we spend our time. Until the advent of streaming services I expect few of us would regularly have wasted most of a week-end ‘binge-watching’ anything. Doing so was usually an event. I can think back to arranging a week-end of watching the entire Lord of the Rings Director’s Cut versions, which meant watching for almost 12 hours. It was a massive undertaking, with pre-invitations going out months before so we could settle on a week-end everyone could make. Now it’s just a case of pressing ‘Next Episode’ because the current one ended on a cliff-hanger. Proverbs 6:10–11 is food for thought:

A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man.

— Proverbs 6:10–11

Yes, there are other ways of wasting time, but this is one with which far too many of us can identify. I am not saying don’t take time for rest and recreation, but manage it well.

Talent

Lastly, we all have talents and abilities which others don’t. It could be skills you’ve acquired in your job, or maybe it’s some form of artistic expression. Whatever it is, every one of us is able to help someone else.

Being wise

In all three these areas we need to be very careful how we go about it. I am reminded of Ephesians 5:15–16, which reads

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

In the Introduction I said that even though most of our witness is done when we are unaware we are witnessing, we can still prepare to do that well, so let’s see how we can do this in the areas of treasure, time, and talent.

In practise (when you are *doing it*), treasure, time, and talent often overlap. Earlier this week I was blessed by someone giving me a very tasty gluten-free snack, which involved all three. It is also often not possible to give of your talent without giving of your time. Regardless, we need to plan, or otherwise the impact will be more limited than it could be. I will use money as an example of how we can go about this. Please note, it is an *example* — there are other ways.

There is an approach to giving known as random acts of kindness. Now this might sound harsh, but please hear me out: random acts of kindness are often little more than a bandage on a lifestyle of selfishness. If your kindness is random, then what are you the rest of the time? Am I saying that random acts of kindness are bad? Well, if it’s emotion that’s driving these acts of kindness, then you’re wide open to manipulation, with

minimal follow-through, if there is any at all. If someone has a dire need, then sure, they need urgent help, but what's going to happen once your random act is finished? Once your resource has been spent? Do they continually depend on people's random acts of kindness? Statistically, they won't make it — what they need is the outworking of a plan, which bring us to what should be the largest part of our giving: *planned* giving.

I call it *committed* planned giving. This is where you have committed a specific portion of your planned giving to a specific need or set of needs: you have made a commitment that you will keep, and they should be able to bank on it — literally! How else can they meet their ongoing needs? I know that Ransom foundation is able to feed people for very much less than one would expect, so when a donor decides for whatever reason to stop supporting them, the result can be that people go hungry. Commitments are serious.

Uncommitted planned giving allows you to build up a war chest reserve to draw upon when there is a sudden and very large need such as someone's house burning down, or someone's child is in an accident not covered by medical aid. It is also money you can use to help unexpectedly when God leads you to. Sometimes the most bizarre events unfold and it is clear that God had a hand in you meeting someone and getting to know their needs.

When you have planned giving in place, you will cut your coat according to your cloth. In other words, knowing how much you have to spend on yourself will drive you to be disciplined with your money and not to live extravagantly, but there is another approach: you can put a cap on your lifestyle. Do you really need that hairdo, those nails, that car, that house, to eat at those restaurants five times a week?

These are limits you set, but set them before you get to them, as something very quickly becomes a new normal. It is this approach that has enabled some people to live on 10% of their income and to give away the other 90%. Had they not done so, they might still have given away a great deal of money compared to most of us here, but in all honesty, what use do you have for more after a certain point? Again, what that point is, is for you to decide on your knees.

Time and talents are closely linked. This example should help. Say you're an electrician and you decided to give someone an hour. In order not to get inundated you ask the church if they know of someone you can help. They point you to a little old lady's home to get her stove and washing-up instant geyser working, so she can have hot meals and hot water. When you arrive, it's a simple job, requiring a new fuse for the stove and replacing the geyser's trip switch in the distribution board. It took all of 15 minutes and you decide to bear the cost of the parts. Now you have a choice: you've only spent 15 minutes — what to do with the other 45 minutes?

You notice that the top hinge of her kitchen door is dangerously loose, so you take off the door, put toothpicks in the stripped holes, and put it back on again for her, now safely secured. That took 20 minutes, and with the remaining 25 you wash her large pile of dishes. You gave of your treasure (you paid for the parts), your talent (fixing the electrical issues and the door), and of your time (washing the dishes). The planned giving (your hour) opened the door for unplanned giving as well. Who knows? Maybe the conversation you had with her also helped someone who was lonely and feeling disconnected. We need to be open for God to use in many different ways.

Conclusion

As you can see, this requires habit-forming, which in turn requires planning. In my sermon of 12 September 2021, I said this:

Discipline needs practice in order for it to become practise.

Practice — abstract noun: repeated effort

Practise — verb: you *doing it, effortlessly*

Here is a list of some things that we can turn into our practise:

Unselfish

- Think of yourself less, not less of yourself
- Set a lifestyle limit
- Define a fixed percentage for planned giving
- Large portion to committed giving
- Time & talent to help others
- Committed time & talent to develop others
- You can't help everyone, so help one at a time
- Develop others through delegation and helping

There are many other aspects to this, especially in how the company where Manby worked did this in a for-profit business context, including what they call their 'Share It Forward Foundation', which helps employees in need. Yes, it is privately held, so it is easier to do things that the likes of Wall Street will try to stop, but he also mentions public companies which have managed to implement similar initiatives — to great success. In fact, they took some of the ideas from such public companies.

If you want to read about one of the most radical success stories in this regard, do yourself a favour and get a copy of the book by Ricardo Semler, called *Maverick: The success story behind the world's most unusual workplace*. It seems to be out of print, but you can find a workable OCR conversion at the Internet Archive.

Right! It's time to turn things around! Not just in our own lives, but also in our understanding about the impact our lives can have. A truly good life is such a rare thing that it stands out. Think of it this way: our eyes take time to get adapted to the dark (about 30 minutes to get about 90% adapted, and several hours for the remaining 10%). But eyes adapted to the dark can see even the coal of a cigarette from a great distance away. This is how smoking has killed many a soldier.

So, in a dark-adapted world, be the light that shines. Even the brightness of a single match will stand out, so start living the good life. Not *la dolce vita*, but the Life that God calls every single one of us to — the life which is the result of the fruit of The Spirit.

I think that every single one of us longs to be treated with love, to experience joy, to be at peace, to have patience extended to us, to be treated with kindness, to live in an

environment characterised by goodness, to experience faithfulness, to be treated with gentleness, and to experience self-control. That was the fruit of The Spirit we read about in Galatians 5:22–23, but from the perspective of one who is receiving this fruit. That kind of behaviour is so unusual that if we live it, the world will be a different place.

Let us pray.

Thank You, Dear Lord God, not only that You have called us to live unselfish lives, but that this is Your model for the society You want us to create. A society where everyone is cared for, where each has dignity, where people can live out their potential. You have called us to live coherent lives, where we are the same wherever and with whomsoever we are. Help us, Lord, to live the Good Life, the life which is exemplified by the fruit of The Spirit. The Life which You wish all to have. Thank You that You give us all that we need for life and for godliness. Please lay on our hearts the desire that You have for all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Amen

References and Sources Consulted

For other references, see the footnotes.

- Manby, Joel. *Love Works: Seven Timeless Principles for Effective Leaders*. Mobi-ASIN:B006BEVZ94
- Semler, Ricardo. *Maverick: The success story behind the world's most unusual workplace*. ISBN 0-446-51696-1. Out of print, but available from <https://archive.org/details/MaverickRicardoSemler>.