

SELFISHNESS

I KINGS 21:1-26

The sin of selfishness comes from forgetting that all we have actually belongs to god. We are merely stewards of what we have.

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Selfishness

I Kings 21:1-26

In order to remind us where we are in this series, we have been taking certain topics from Jerry Bridge's book Respectable Sins. Our goal has been to try and identify unhealthy thought and behavior patterns here at church, and then to try and build a godly culture here based on biblical principles. We have identified ungodliness and pride so far. This morning, we are going to deal with selfishness.

It may be hard for us to identify since we have been raised to be narcissists. We are taught to get the best for ourselves because we are worth it and we deserve the best. I don't know when our society changed, but it must have been within the last sixty years because I can remember being taught to share and to worry about others in school as a young child. But somewhere along the line, society became narcissistic: every person for themselves.

Let me give you an example of how narcissists think. One day a priest, a teacher, a millionaire, and a narcissist were playing golf together. As they walked the course, they came up behind a foursome that was moving very slowly, and didn't offer to let them play through. As the marshal drove by, they asked about the poor sportsmanship of the slow group in front of them. The marshal explained that the slow golfers were blind. The priest said, "Oh, bless their souls. I will keep them in my prayers." The teacher said, "I will tell my students how inspiring they are." The millionaire said, "I will offer to pay their greens fees for the next year." ... The narcissist said, "Why can't they play at night?"

Even as I tell that joke, it seems to me that many of us, when confronted with inconvenient situations, find ourselves reasoning with the narcissist.

If you remember, Jerry Bridges said that ungodliness was the root of all the other sins. Let me just restate how Bridges defines ungodliness, "Ungodliness may be defined as living one's everyday life with little or no thought of God, or of God's will, or of God's glory, or of one's dependence of God." Last week we said that the only way we could fall into the sin of pride is when we take our attention off of our standing with God and start to compare ourselves with other people. In other words, when we compare ourselves to God and His standard of holiness, we always have to be humbled. It is only when we compare ourselves to others that we can think of ourselves as good in any way.

In this morning's text we will see that selfishness can only manifest itself when we come to think that what we have belongs to us. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **THE SIN OF SELFISHNESS COMES FROM FORGETTING THAT ALL WE HAVE ACTUALLY BELONGS TO GOD. WE ARE MERELY STEWARDS OF WHAT WE HAVE.** When we forget that everything in the entire universe was created by God and belongs to God, we are not likely to be selfish. It is only when we think things belong to us that we open ourselves up to falling to selfishness.

THE ROOTS OF SELFISHNESS (VS 1-6)

Verses 1-6 describe the roots of selfishness. The point is this. **SELFISH PEOPLE ARE SO SELF-ABSORBED, THEY CANNOT EVEN CONSIDER THE NEEDS OF OTHERS.** In other words, when we are so focused on ourselves, it is impossible to interact with others in a godly manner.

Verses 1-2 illustrate the fact that selfish people are self-absorbed. In these two verses, we are introduced to King Ahab, one of Israel's worst kings. It seems as if King Ahab was walking around his palace and noticed a nice piece of land that bordered his grounds. It was a vineyard that belonged to a Hebrew citizen named Naboth.

Now King Ahab couldn't just admire the vineyard, he had to possess it. He approached Naboth and said, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." There are several mistakes that selfish people make. First of all, they think they are entitled to have whatever they want no matter how it affects others around them. King Ahab wants the vineyard and he doesn't care what Naboth even thinks. Secondly, they assume that everyone thinks like they do and values the same things. He assumes that everyone values money and profit. He tells Naboth he will make it financially worth his while. But mostly, self-absorbed people forget that God and not them is the owner of all that is and only God has a sovereign right over all that exists.

In his book, Bridges talks about several places where we are tempted to be selfish. As we work our way through the text this morning, we would do well to examine our lives to see if we are tempted with selfishness. We are tempted to be selfish in regards to our own interests and personal agendas. In other words, we are often tempted to think that what we want, our desires, and our satisfaction is more important than others' around us. Secondly, we are tempted to be selfish with our time. In other words, we assume that our time is more important than other people's time. We are tempted to be selfish with our money. We are often tempted to be selfish with our attention. In other words, we are tempted to be inconsiderate. And finally, we are tempted to be selfish with power.

As I examine my own life, I find that I'm not always willing to share of my time, my interests and agenda with God. If we as church people only give God what's leftover in our lives, then what makes us think we won't be selfish and self-absorbed with others.

Let's just take a self-test. Do we give God the first of our money? In other words, is the very first thing we do when we get paid, take a tenth of our money and write a check to church? Do we look for opportunities to give money to God's work? Do we look for opportunities to share our money with others?

How do we do with our time? Do we give the best of our time to God? Or do we find ourselves giving God whatever is leftover of our time? Is it important for us to do our devotions? Is it important for us to come to church? It seems that if we don't feel like it, we don't come to church. We would never think of missing work or school. But it seems as if church is not a priority for us.

I think oftentimes we get so absorbed in what we want and what we are doing, that we don't care what God wants. If we are inconsiderate with God, what makes us think we can be considerate to others? Let me just take a quote from the book of First John. John says:

“²⁰If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen” (I John 4:20 / NLT)?

We all understand that logic. But let me just reverse that thought process in this particular case. If we are Christians, then we believe God gave up His own life so we could be rescued from eternal damnation. We also know that He created everything and everything belongs to Him. Now if we can't find time to spend with Him because our time is so valuable to us, and if we can't manage to give Him a tenth of all our money and possessions because we need them, and if we can't submit to His plans and agenda, then what makes us think we won't be selfish when it comes to sharing of ourselves with others?

A good place for us to start in avoiding the sin of selfishness is to start concentrating on our relationship with God and freely giving Him our time, our money, our interests, and submitting to His plan for our lives. Again, if we realize that everything we have belongs to God, it will be more difficult to be selfish.

The word for selfishness in Greek is never used as a good thing. It is used in very negative ways. Let's look at some of its uses in the Bible. James says this:

“¹⁴But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your hearts, don't brag about being wise. That is the worst kind of lie” (James 3:14 / NLT).

The Apostle Paul says this:

“¹⁷Those others do not have pure motives as they preach about Christ. They preach with selfish ambition, not sincerely, intending to make my chains more painful to me” (Philippians 1:17 / NLT).

Speaking about God's response to selfish people, Paul writes:

“⁸But he will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and practice evil deeds” (Romans 2:8 / NLT).

And here is Paul's command to Philippian Church:

“³Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself” (Philippians 2:3 / NLT).

The word in Greek is *eritheia*. It describes people who follow their base ambitions, who are self-seeking, who cause factions and divisions, who possess despicable natures and who do not obey the truth. These people only think about themselves.

When someone challenges them, they are confused as described in verse 3. King Ahab was not ready for Naboth's response. Naboth has a whole different set of values than does King Ahab. Naboth is not interested in turning a prophet nor does he value money or status. Furthermore, Naboth is not impressed by King Ahab's status, power, or money. Naboth values his relationship with God and values the inheritance God gave him. When Israel conquered the Promised Land, a territory of land was apportioned to each tribe and every family received a plot of land as their inheritance from God and that inheritance was to be passed on from one generation to the next. It was to be a valued gift from God. Listen to what God says in the book of Leviticus:

“²³And remember, the land must never be sold on a permanent basis because it really belongs to me. You are only foreigners and tenants living with me” (Leviticus 25:23 / NLT).

Naboth had a whole different set of values than King Ahab. Naboth valued the things of God and this confused King Ahab. Self-absorbed people think only of gratifying themselves and in the process forget about God and have no use for God's values. In fact, if they are religious, they manipulate God's laws to get what they want.

When selfish people don't get what they want they often become sullen as described in verses 4-6. King Ahab went home and sulked. Not only did he sulk, he became angry. How dare that Naboth not give me his vineyard? Doesn't he know who I am? I am the king of Israel. Not only did I offer to buy it, I offered him much more than it was worth. Self-centered people often overestimate their own importance and their own righteousness. In King Ahab's world, he was being kind and generous to offer Naboth more money than the land was worth. But again, King Ahab failed to see that Naboth had a whole different value system. When self-absorbed people run into people who don't buy into their own importance or their value system, they become angry. We need to be careful not to get self-absorbed because the real danger is this. **SELFISH PEOPLE ARE SO SELF-ABSORBED, THEY CANNOT EVEN CONSIDER THE NEEDS OF OTHERS.**

THE BEHAVIOR OF SELFISHNESS (VS 7-16)

Not being aware of other's needs because we are so self-focused leads to selfish behavior that is described in verses 7-16. **SELFISH PEOPLE DON'T CARE ABOUT WHO THEY HURT.** If you have ever been around self-absorbed people, you know how hard it is to be around them. You never know when they are going to lash out and you never know when they are going to blow up. Watch the progression of this behavior. In verses 7-16 we see two self-absorbed people plotting to get what they want and what they think they are entitled to. Here is what never ceases to amaze me. For some strange reason, there are always people around these self-absorbed people who are willing to go along with them. I don't know if it's because they fear them, or perhaps they agree with their thought processes. But if people truly wanted to be a friend to them, they should stand up and tell them to cut it out. If Jezebel had been a godly wife, she would have told Ahab to get over it and grow up. Instead she comes up with a plan to get the land. This plan uses God and involves lying, cheating, and murder. Here is the plan they come up with. The king will proclaim a day of fasting. During the time of fasting, two hired scoundrels will sit near Naboth during the public prayers. During the prayer time, the scoundrels

will stand up and say they heard Naboth curse both God and the king. The crime requires the people to stone Naboth to death.

Here is the problem if you are a selfish person. People are so afraid of you; they will never stand up to you and confront you with your behavior. The problem for the rest of us who are around self-absorbed people is that if we are Christians, we have to confront them and take a stand against them. Otherwise, we become party to everyone they hurt.

Look where this self-absorbed and unchallenged behavior leads. In verses 11-14 we see it lead clearly to murder. Look who shares in the guilt of this plan. First of all, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are guilty in the murder of Naboth. The elders and nobles of the city who complied with this plan share in the guilt of Naboth's murder. And finally the two scoundrels who falsely accused Naboth are guilty of the murder. And to some extent, though unknowing participants, so are the people who stoned Naboth. These unrighteous people used God's laws to kill a righteous man.

Self-absorbed people murder people's feelings, murder people's reputations, and murder the spirits of the people around them. And as verses 15-16 point out, they are so self-absorbed, they don't care about what they have to do or who they have to hurt to get what they want. Listen to these two verses and feel how cold-hearted they are:

"15As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." 16When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard" (I Kings 21:15-16 / NIV).

There is no remorse or even an awareness of the wrong they committed. We need to be very careful about being selfish and self-absorbed because as we have seen **SELFISH PEOPLE DON'T CARE ABOUT WHO THEY HURT.**

THE FATE OF SELFISHNESS (VS 17-26)

Even though selfish people seem to get what they want through intimidation or manipulation, the fate of selfishness is described in verses 17-26. The reality is this. **SELFISH PEOPLE WILL LEARN THE HARD WAY THAT EVERYTHING BELONGS TO GOD.** When we see the fate of selfish people, we come to realize that not standing up to them and confronting them is really harming them.

Verses 17-19 show us that selfish people are rebuked by the lives of the righteous. I don't know how this happens, but for some strange reason, when we get caught up in sin, we forget that God sees everything we do, hears everything we say, and knows everything we think. And yet, here we find the king of Israel, God's chosen nation, walking around his newly acquired vineyard, admiring all that he has accomplished. He wanted the vineyard, and now he has it. He is walking around it, planning in his mind how he will design his new vegetable garden. Whenever I find myself thinking selfishly or acting selfishly, I wake up quickly and realize that I may be able to fool people, but God cannot be fooled. The problem is that when we get so deeply entangled in sin, we forget about God. Please if you find yourself acting selfishly, please take

time to remind yourself that God sees all, hears all, and knows all. That should shock us back to reality.

King Ahab's day is about to take a turn for the bad. Since God saw this whole thing, He sends the prophet Elijah to confront and rebuke King Ahab. Look at the message God speaks to Ahab:

"... Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? ... In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood – yes, yours" (I Kings 21:19 / NIV)!

Wow! That is quite a message. Now that King Ahab has heard that, I'm pretty sure he is not so happy with his new property. I don't think he thought it was worth the price of his life. King Ahab learned this truth too late.

Listen, self-absorbed people will say and do whatever it takes for them to have their own way. And they won't stop until they are confronted by a righteous person who is just as strong willed as they are. Elijah was a prophet who never backed down from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. He was a constant thorn in their flesh. They never learned, but at least they had a chance to repent.

If you are married to a self-absorbed person or are friends with a self-absorbed person, you may be their only hope of getting right with God. Going along with them will only entrench them in their behavior. The only chance a self-absorbed person has is if someone will stand up to them. Believe me, I know it's hard but to let them continue on will only bring misery to those around them, and ultimately judgment on them.

As verses 20-24 clearly illustrate, they will be rebuked by God. Look how Ahab responds to Elijah:

"... So you have found me, my enemy" (I Kings 21:20 / NIV).

Here is what I want us to note here. Elijah is God's anointed prophet for the time. When Elijah speaks in this section, he is actually speaking for God. So in reality what Ahab is acknowledging is that God is his enemy and God has found him out. Because selfish people have set themselves above God, God will bring them down. Again, I think it's worth listening to God's word to Ahab through the prophet Elijah:

²⁰*... I have found you, ... because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD.*

²¹*I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free. ²²I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.*

²³*... And also concerning Jezebel ... Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel. ...*

²⁴*Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country" (I Kings 21:20-24 / NIV).*

How would any of us want to hear God say that directly to us? Somewhere along the line, we have seemed to lose our fear of God. We have turned God into this friendly old indulgent grandfather who accepts all our behavior. We have forgotten that God will not tolerate this kind of behavior. If we have lost our fear of God, then we have forgotten Who He is; how powerful and dangerous He really is. King Solomon put it this way:

“⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Proverbs 1:7 / NIV).

When we start to act in selfish and self-absorbed ways, thinking about how powerful and dangerous God is, and how He deals with the selfish should immediately cause us to repent and change our ways. Remember the thought driving this whole series is that we can avoid these sins by consciously and intentionally living in God’s presence and in submission to His will for our lives.

This is serious stuff because as verses 25-26 state, the self-absorbed will be rebuked by history. From time to time I think about what my family and friends will say when I die. Will they be thankful that a selfish and self-centered old man finally died? Or will they be sad that someone who was a kind and generous man will no longer be with them? We have that choice. If we are self-absorbed, people will be happy to see us leave and be rid of us. On the other hand, if we are truly kind, generous, and happy, people will be sad to see us go.

If you think God wasn’t serious about this, let me just read you a portion of the fulfillment of this prophecy after Ahab was killed by a randomly fired arrow:

“³⁸They washed the chariot at a pool in Samaria (where the prostitutes bathed), and the dogs licked up his blood, as the word of the LORD had declared” (I Kings 22:38 / NIV).

When God says He will punish the wicked, that’s exactly what He means. Listen to the final words that are spoken about King Ahab:

“²⁵(There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. ²⁶He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel)” (I Kings 21:25-26 / NIV).

I don’t know about you, but I really don’t want that to be the way God sums up my life. Again, the only answer seems to be the pursuit of holy living consciously and intentionally in the presence of God. **SELFISH PEOPLE WILL LEARN THE HARD WAY THAT EVERYTHING BELONGS TO GOD.**

This series of sermons is meant to give us an occasion to examine our lives and to build a biblical culture here at church. In other words, we are saying that God has expectations of us here as a church community. The Apostle Paul said that we should model ourselves after Christ when he gave this command to the Philippian Church:

“³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3 / NIV).

We may not think of ourselves as selfish until we examine how we are at giving God the best of our time, our money, our interests and submitting to His will for our lives. And how are we at sharing our time, money, and power with others around us? Do we consider others' interests as important as ours and do we look to submit to others? Here is what I'd like us to remember.

THE SIN OF SELFISHNESS COMES FROM FORGETTING THAT ALL WE HAVE ACTUALLY BELONGS TO GOD. WE ARE MERELY STEWARDS OF WHAT WE HAVE.

Self-absorbed people really are miserable people. Listen to how Joy Davidman describes them:

“Living for his own pleasure is the least pleasurable thing a man can do; if his neighbors don't kill him in disgust, he will die slowly of boredom and lovelessness.”

We are most Christ-like when we realize that our time, money, power, possessions, talents, gifts, and interests all belong to God; and then share them with all those around us, especially with those in the Body of Christ.