

Cultivating the Soil of Self

We're in the middle of a series called "Deeper" where we're looking at what it means to have deep faith. Last week we looked at Jesus' parable of the soils—if you missed it, you can listen to it on the church website and I would recommend that you go back and listen to it, because it will give you some background on what we're talking about here.

We often get into the habit of blaming our shallowness on other things outside ourselves—the preaching, the curriculum, the music, whatever. But Jesus tells us in the parable of the soils that my depth problem is a "me" problem. The Word of God is a potent, life-changing message, but for various reasons, I've become hardened and I don't allow the Word to penetrate deep into my heart.

Over the course of the next few weeks, we're looking at some of the things that keep the Word of God from penetrating us and with each one, we'll look at how we can cultivate our soil and be fruitful.

Now last week, we learned that the fruit of deep faith—or the end result of spiritual depth is that our lives become characterized by love—by a sacrificial outward-focused orientation toward others. But one of the reasons we don't love better is because the work God wants to do inside of us is blocked by our own self-centeredness.

One of the features I like on my iPhone is the GPS app. Basically it's a map that always shows me where I am. I can tell it what restaurant I'm looking for and it'll tell me how to get there. One nice thing about it is that I can make the map bigger or smaller or I can just take my finger and move the entire map. Then if I forget where I am on the map, there's this little button here that I press and right away, it'll move me right back to the center of the screen.

Then, when I start driving, I will stay right in the middle of the screen and the whole world will move. According to my iPhone, I just stay right where I am and the whole world moves. That's what self-centeredness is really about. It's the core belief that I am the gauge that everything else is measured by. My actions show that I think I'm the most important person in the world and everyone else should move around me. Our lives show this belief in a number of different ways.

One way selfishness rears its head is *laziness*. Laziness is the belief that other people should serve me. This is especially true within families. I work really hard. I put in long hours, so when I get done with work, I just want to sit around and watch TV, despite the fact that the house needs to be cleaned, or maybe the kids need help with their homework, or Duncan wants to play soccer. So when Ann asks me to take out the dog, I get annoyed. Obviously she doesn't know how hard I work. Laziness is my way of hoping that someone else will take care of what needs to be done.

Another way, self-centeredness shows itself is in *stubbornness*. Stubbornness has its roots in the need to be right. When you're being stubborn, there are two things you don't care about—the truth and the other person.

I remember having an e-mail conversation with a friend of mine who is an atheist. It started out as a little friendly talk about God and why I believe he exists—of course, my friend doesn't believe that. But we were talking about it and really started talking around in circles and getting nowhere. At that point, the best thing to do is just to let it go, but I didn't do that. I kept pressing on a point that I thought was a very strong point and ended up saying something that was very insensitive and hurtful to him. I was a little frustrated and saw an opportunity to win the argument.

But in my quest to win the argument, the one who really lost was God, because by the time I said that insensitive thing, bringing him to Jesus wasn't really on my mind—winning the debate was. I wasn't concerned about the truth and I didn't care about my friend. I asked for forgiveness and he was gracious even when I was not. In the end the problem is that the argument became more about me and how smart or clever I was than about him finding Jesus. Being right will be counter-productive if I'm not, first of all loving. Stubbornness will never allow me to change or grow because the essence of stubbornness is the belief that it's the other person who needs to change, not me.

Self-centeredness also takes the form of *self-righteousness*. Self-righteousness means you're confident of your standing with God because of the things you do. Self-

righteous people are self-centered, first of all because the Bible tells us that there's no one who is righteous. So it's pretty arrogant to think that we're the exception. But the other problem is that the only way we can maintain the façade of righteousness is by conveniently neglecting our sins, while pointing out how other people don't measure up to the rules God *really* cares about.

Last week we said that "love" is the fruit of a deep life. When my greatest concern is about my own righteousness, then I will have a tendency to avoid people I should be spending time with or only have the goal of making them like me. Either way, I can't love them because I'm only thinking about how well I'm following the rules.

And an even greater problem is that when I'm self-righteous, my biggest concern is actually more that people *think* I'm righteous than actually being righteous according to God. When I'm self-righteous, I'm only concerned about being righteous on the outside and completely neglect what's on the inside. This was Jesus' biggest problem with the Pharisees.

Self-centeredness also shows itself in *image-management*. Think about all the little things you do on a day to day basis to give people the impression that you're just a little bit better, a little more Christian, a little more humble than you really are. We are so good at image management. Image management is when we try to control what other people think about us. Some people do it by being the life of the party—they want people to see them as fun and care-free. Shy people manage their image by not drawing

any attention to themselves. People may not think I'm anything great, but at least I won't risk them thinking something bad or embarrassing about me.

A classic example of this that I've done many times is when we want to tell someone about a funny scene in a TV show, we'll always preface it by saying, "I don't really watch that much TV, but..." You know, "I happened to be walking by the TV on the way to going to read my Bible and someone else must have had it on and in a weak moment, I heard something on there that was really funny. It was actually a complete fluke that we even have a TV..."

It's those little things where we try to control what other people think about us that also convince us that we really don't need to change anything—we're really OK the way we are. And the reason self-centeredness is so damaging is because it hardens us and we end up buying into a false view of ourselves.

Kermit is our Cocker Spaniel—in every way an average-sized dog and a very pathetic creature, really. When it comes to being petted he is shameless. Occasionally, if you're sitting around, he'll walk up to you, sit down and raise his paw saying, "pet me, please." You'll rub his head for a minute and stop and he'll raise his paw again, "pet me again." Sometimes, if you walk by him and he's laying on the floor, he'll see you coming and will lift his leg and turn over on his back as if to say, "rub my belly." Sad really.

Back in Cedar Rapids, our neighbors had a daughter with a tiny little yippy dog that thought it was pretty big stuff. I don't know what kind it was, but I'm sure even good exterminators would confuse it for a fuzzy rat.

One day I had Kermit out on the leash in the back yard and the yippy dog got loose and somehow had the impression that he could take Kermit even though he was about a fifth of his size. He zipped into our yard yipping up storm thinking he was really big stuff. Kermit just watched him come and when the little dog got close enough, much to his terror, Kermit just pounced on him and started gnawing on his head. I was so proud, so I just let him gnaw for a few more seconds. He doesn't get a chance to do that very often, so I thought it would be cool to let Kermit think he was big-stuff.

The truth is, like this little dog, we tend to be pretty delusional when it comes to how we see ourselves. We tend to think we are bigger, stronger, and more important than we really are and we can spend a lot of time and energy trying to prove that to people.

Last week, we learned that the process of spiritual growth—of cultivating soft soil is a painful process where we allow God to rip and tear to soften the surface of our lives. And some people are so intent on proving themselves that this process is an incredibly painful one. Like the little yippy dog, some of us have to learn the hard way. All spiritual growth involves some degree of pain, but when we voluntarily allow God to do it, the process isn't quite as hard.

The first step in the process of letting go of self, the first step to cultivating our selfish soil is *worship*. Worship is the act of ascribing ultimate worth to something. The very act of worshipping God combats the tendency we have to make ourselves the ultimate authority and center of our life. Here's what I mean.

Earlier, we read a passage from Isaiah 6 that I think exemplifies the attitude that we all naturally have when we encounter God. I think one of the main problems we have—a least I think I have this problem is that we rarely make the space where we can truly encounter God as He is. We might yip toward Him, but seldom do we ever really get close enough to be confronted with how big God really is.

Isaiah 6 begins with the words, “In the year King Uzziah died...” For most of us that means pretty much nothing. Uzziah is just an old crusty dude that's barely mentioned in the Old Testament. But at the time, that meant a lot.

Israel had gone through a time where it went through kings left and right—some of them were good kings and other kings were bad kings. Uzziah was one of the good guys and he reigned for a long time—52 years in all. In those days, God very seldom allowed a guy to rule that long if they weren't doing the job. Uzziah obeyed God and led Israel in righteousness so his fame began to spread all throughout the world. The problem is that when the whole world knows about you, it goes to your head. Unfortunately, it did for Uzziah.

In the temple there were things that only certain people were allowed to do and places only a few were allowed to go—and the king was not one of these people. The temple was the domain of the priests and regardless of how powerful you were, they were the only ones allowed to do their thing. One of those things was to sacrifice in the temple.

Listen to what it says in 2 Chronicles 26, ¹⁶ **But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. ¹⁷ Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. ¹⁸ They confronted King Uzziah and said, “It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the LORD God.”**

¹⁹ **Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD’s temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. ²⁰ When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the LORD had afflicted him.”**

Even though Uzziah had been faithful for most of his life, because of his fame, he forgot who he was. Uzziah lived another 11 years pretty much in isolation and the story of Uzziah would have been told far and wide and certainly Isaiah was personally aware of what happened to Uzziah. So when Isaiah wrote about this vision in Isaiah 6, of God filling the temple, the only possible response he could offer would be to recoil.

Now the passage doesn't say that Isaiah was physically in the temple, but at least in a vision, he was there with God and knowing what happened to Uzziah, Isaiah was terrified. When Isaiah caught a glimpse of God, his first response was, "Oh man, I'm dead!" because when Isaiah was confronted with the truth about God, he understood the truth about himself. I'm nothing. I'm sinful. I'm nothing great. I'm unclean.

That's why the first step to cultivate the soil of selfishness in our life is to understand the truth about God, because it's only when we understand the truth about God that we understand the truth about ourselves. I can go on living my life as if I'm the center and pad my lifestyle and do my own thing, but there's going to come a time when I come up against a holy God and at that moment, how will I be able to respond?

If we start with our own good works and try to be righteous and unselfish on our own without really understanding God, we'll always be tempted to think we're good enough because of the things we do. When we try to be righteous without God at the heart, we're just acting.

We have every reason to believe that Isaiah was a pretty clean-cut guy. He was a prophet who was faithful to God. Yet his first response when he saw God was to realize that I am a man of unclean lips. I am profane. I am unworthy. And yet, God gives him grace and cleanses his lips and says, “I have a job for you. Will you accept it?” And Isaiah submitted to God.

Now I have this as sort of a step 2, but the reality is that when we encounter God in worship our natural reaction is to *submit*. To submit means to give up control, to yield your power to someone else—in this case, to God. In fact, I would say—because I believe the Bible shows us— that if our worship doesn’t result in our submitting to God, then we haven’t really worshipped. How does it make sense that we ascribe ultimate worth to someone, but don’t submit? In fact, if we acknowledge that God is ultimate and we don’t submit, we are in rebellion against God, right? So in order for our encounter with God to be worship, it has to result in life change.

But how do I do this practically? It’s great to encounter God in worship and all that, but what if you’ve never done that before. How does that happen? Let me give you a few things to practice.

First, the *worship service* is a good opportunity for you to encounter God. We want to create an environment here every week where you can encounter God. But in order for that to happen, we have to come into the service with an attitude of submission. We live in a consumer culture, so sometimes we can come to a service with a critical spirit. “I

liked the music today” or “I didn’t really care for the sermon,” “the service lasted too long.” Give that up. Come in here asking, “What will my encounter with God today, mean for me?” or “How can I know the God of universe in a deeper way than when I came?” When we come in and evaluate the service we don’t truly participate, because in order to evaluate, we have to make ourselves an impartial observer. It’s not about me, it’s about God. Actually, the fact that I’ve been here should result in everything becoming less about me. So come expecting to encounter God.

Sometimes we just come to worship service out of routine. “Alright kids, we have to go to church again.” This isn’t intended to be a routine or a ritual, but it’s coming again to be reminded that we worship a God who made the heavens and earth and yet knows every detail about us—every sin, every fault, every thought, and loves us anyway. How can we ever treat that encounter as a routine?

But the worship service isn’t the only place to encounter God. You should also worship individually on a daily basis. Take a passage like Isaiah 6 or Isaiah 40 that reminds us of how big God is and read it in the morning before you start your day and meditate on it throughout the day. How does your view of God impact the way you view people and interact with them? Put on a worship CD and just sit in His presence. Allow God to move in your emotions.

If you truly do ascribe ultimate worth to God, then how can you not take the time each day for Him? What if you were to tell someone that tennis was of ultimate

importance to you, but you never played or watched tennis? What would they say? If you say you worship God—that He’s the most important thing, but you never spend any time with Him, what does that really say? Take the time daily to read the Bible, to pray, to just sit and think about God at least. I just think if we say God is the ultimate thing in life, then we should show it a little bit.

Now, I’m going to suggest a couple other practical things to rid us of self-centeredness, but let me just give you this caution. In a way, I’m hesitant to even mention them, because if your life isn’t, first of all, characterized by worship of God and submitting to Him in your heart, these other things will only take the form of legalism and self-righteousness. The only way these other things make sense is if we get off our own throne, and put God in His rightful place.

Another way to cultivate the soil of self is to make *fasting* a regular part of your life. Fasting is not something we do a lot of, but I think in our culture, it’s especially important. Our culture is a culture of excess where we can have just about anything we want whenever we want it. We don’t even have to have the money; we can just charge it and worry about paying later. It’s enough to convince us that we deserve to have anything and everything.

Fasting is the intentional act of denying ourselves something for the sake of a greater good. There’s no virtue in denying yourself something just to do it. But if I deny myself something that I could have, I remind myself that my life is not about making me

happy. I can fast from food. I can fast from TV. I can fast from shopping. Fasting from a habit or anything that I just mindlessly do can help remind me of my place in the world.

Another way to cultivate the soil of self is *service in hiddenness*. Sometimes serving people can become just another way to get recognition and control the way other people see us. But when we serve someone or give generously and no one ever knows, it rids us of the self-focus we can have even when we serve.

Now all through this series, the key is going to be, first of all honesty. If you want this series to be more than just an interesting series or just another series, you have to be willing to sit down and take a good, hard look at yourself, but awareness is only part of the battle.

But when you see something—some hard spot that keeps you from growing, you have to be willing to change things—you have to be willing to put it into practice. Just knowing something is wrong doesn't fix it. Only when you take specific measures and start to open yourself up to God's work in your life will you start down the road to a deeper faith.