

The Gospel of Self

In 1964, a Psychologist named Milton Rokeach wrote a book called “The Three Christs of Ypsilanti.” The book was a long case-study of three men, Leon, Joseph and Clyde diagnosed with psychotic delusional disorder grandiose type—each of whom believed he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ.

For two years, he worked with them individually without any real success. He got an idea from Harper’s magazine when he read the story of another psychologist who was able to help a woman recover from her delusion that she was the Virgin Mary by rooming her with another woman who also believed she was the Virgin Mary.

Out of any better ideas, he moved Leon, Joseph and Clyde in together. They roomed together, worked together and did therapy together all day every day. He wanted to see if encountering the others would confront them with reality. Predictably, each of the men maintained his belief that he was Jesus Christ. And how did they handle the others? Well, each wrote the others off as patients in a mental hospital.

The experiment didn’t yield the results he wanted, but it did make for some interesting conversations. When one of the men would explain that he was the Messiah, Son of God sent to save the world, Rokeach asked, “How do you know?” “God told me.” And one of the other men would chime in, “I told you no such thing!”

While this is an amusing story, it's really just an exaggerated version of a temptation each of us deals with—the temptation to live as though we are the center of the universe. Now, we don't think we're Jesus Christ, but we're all somewhere on the spectrum of a Messiah complex. If I can't save everyone, at least I can save myself. And the reason is pretty easy to see.

First of all, we seem to be hard-wired to view the world this way. If you've ever been around a toddler, you know that we don't have to teach kids to be selfish. We are desire factories. We love comfort. We love to possess things. That's why the word "mine" is always among the first words a toddler learns—it gives her words to express what she's already feeling inside.

But we don't have to look at our children to see this because we all know how natural it feels to focus on ourselves. This sermon isn't just about you, it's also about me. I have to admit that it's not natural for me to wake up in the morning and ask, *"How can I make this the best day possible for my wife?"* No, I wake up in the morning and I think, "My back hurts, I should remember to make an appointment for a massage on Monday."

I wake up and think, "I hope Ann takes Justin to school this morning because I have a lot of work to do and my work is really important, so I need to get into the office early." Don't judge me. You do it, too!

But what makes it even worse is that not only is it natural for us, we live in a society that whole-heartedly preaches what I call the "Gospel of Self." This is the last message in

our “Where’s the Good News” series, where we’re exploring the gospels our culture preaches to us. Gospel, means “good news.” We all recognize that there is something wrong with the world—that everything isn’t the way it should be. There are wars between countries and wars between individuals. Some people starve while others get richer. Despite all of our technological advancement and good intentions, there’s a lot of suffering in the world. And we know we’re a part of the problem. So, we need good news.

Today, we’re talking about the Gospel of Self. In the late 60’s, a psychologist named Nathaniel Branden pioneered a movement based on his research that would revolutionize the way we think about people. The movement was called the “self-esteem movement,” which could really be synonymous with The Gospel of Self.

And this one statement pretty much sums up what Branden believed is the problem. He wrote, *“I cannot think of a single psychological problem – from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molestation – that is not traced back to the problem of low self-esteem.”*

So, the story goes, if the problem is low self-esteem, the solution is boosting people’s self-esteem. This legacy is why even today we constantly hear messages—you’re special, you’re perfect just the way you are. Pop stars sing songs that tell us, we are “beautiful in every single way.” An NBC Public Service Announcement once said this, “You may not realize it, but everyone is born with their one true love – themselves. If you like you, everyone else will too.”

Author Diane Mastromarino wrote in her book, “The Girl’s Guide to Loving Yourself,” *“Loving yourself means knowing how great you are and not letting any person, any place, or anything ever get in the way of that.”* This is the dogma we’ve been taught the last 50 to 60 years. And the thought was that the world would get better and better if everyone only learned to love themselves.

Now, like all the competing gospels we’ve look at, I want to be fair, because there’s always a grain of truth in each one. That’s why people believe them. So, what can we affirm about the Gospel of Self?

Well, one thing we can affirm is that there’s always a small group people who really do need to hear the message that they are valuable and worthy of love. For instance, *people who are physically or emotionally abused will believe the lie that they’re worthless and they deserve the abuse they receive day after day.* Abusers tend to be very skilled at convincing their victim that they somehow did it to themselves. “You make me do this.” Victims of abuse need to hear the message that they didn’t deserve it. They’re worthy of love and respect. For them, this message can be a life-line.

The other good that comes from the Gospel of Self is that *it’s helped us pay attention to the damaging effects of shame.* Shame is different than guilt. Guilt tells us we did a bad thing, shame tells us we *are* bad; we’re irredeemable and cannot be loved by others because we are unlovable. Now, the Gospel of Self has been a welcome

message to people who do struggle with shame. And unfortunately, one of the greatest dealers in shaming has been religion.

Jesus didn't shame people, but he did call them to repent. Sinners flocked to Jesus because he reached out to the people pushed to the margins of society by religious people to show them that, even when other pushed them away, God sees them and loves them. His message wasn't, "*You're perfect just the way you are. Don't change a thing.*" It was to say, "God loves you in all your flaws and your sins, but he won't abandon you. He will walk beside you to help you become the masterpiece he created you to be. You might not be there yet, but he will walk with you."

While the Gospel of Self might have some good elements, and often sounds like the Gospel of Jesus, I want to talk about three big differences between the Gospel of Self and the Gospel of Jesus. To see these differences, I want to turn to the passage we read earlier from Matthew, chapter 20.

The first difference is that they prescribe different paths to wholeness. *The Gospel of Self says the path to wholeness is promoting self while Jesus says the path to wholeness is through losing yourself.* The story centers on two of Jesus' disciples—James and John—the sons of Zebedee. Along with Peter, James and John were a part of Jesus' inner circle. A little earlier in Matthew, Jesus singled out Peter because he gave the right answer to the question, "Who do you say I am?" Peter said, "You are the Messiah, Son of the living

God.” And because of that, Jesus gave him a prestigious place in the Church. He said, “You are Peter (which means Rock) and on this rock I will build my church.”

Well, now as Jesus and his disciples are walking along James and John want to get in on the action. They were feeling a bit of competition with Peter. Most commentators believe that even though it was their mother who asked the question, James and John put her up to it.

She came to Jesus and said, “Hey, Jesus. What do you think of my boys here— James and John? Pretty cool guys, aren’t they?” Jesus said, “Yeah, they’re alright.”

“They’ve been good disciples, don’t you think?...following you around for this whole time and have done everything you’ve said. And they don’t say stupid stuff like Peter, right?”

“I suppose.”

“So...can I ask for a favor?”

“OK? Depends on what it is.”

“When you get done doing all your Messiah stuff and you become the King and you’re sitting on your throne, can James and John have shotgun?”

Sitting at the king’s right hand and left hand are positions of prestige. If you can’t be the king, this is where you want to sit because everyone will look at you and say, “Whoa, he must be someone really important. Look where he gets to sit.”

Their goal was to be recognized. They wanted the places of honor and power. In fact, in order to ask that, they had to believe they *deserved* to be there. This is right out of the Gospel of Self playbook. The path from being a nobody to a somebody is promoting yourself. You *deserve* it, so jump in and claim it.

But for Jesus, the path to wholeness is in promoting yourself, it's in losing yourself. You see, the path for Jesus was different because the destination is different. The Gospel of Self puts all its stock in this world and in this world, things like comfort, power and recognition are the goal.

That's why Jesus says in verse 25, **"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them."** When people get to the top, they want to stay on the top and they want to use it to their advantage. And they have to work to keep others in their place. But Jesus tells them, **"Not so with you."**

Jesus is different because being great in the eyes of the world mean nothing to him. Jesus tells us it doesn't matter what this world thinks, what matters is what God thinks. So, we don't live for the praise of others. We're not to live to please ourselves or to bring glory to ourselves. The only thing that matters is what God says about us.

So, what's the path? Verse 26, **"Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave..."** The way to be great in God's kingdom and the way to bring glory to God is to serve others. I don't demand my rights and proclaim that "I deserve it." I serve. That's Jesus' path.

The second difference is that they bear different fruit. What was the result of James and John's request? Verse 24, **"When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers."** People who preach the Gospel of Self do it because they believe it will bring personal and societal peace. But that ignores the fact that *focusing on happiness doesn't make us happy and it doesn't improve the world.*

This is like telling someone with diabetes, *"Here, eat more sweets. Don't let those mean people tell you there's something wrong with you."* And the research bears this out. Two researchers who have done the most work on self-esteem, Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell, write this, *"In trying to build a society that celebrates high self-esteem, self-expression, and 'loving yourself,' [North] Americans have inadvertently created more narcissists – and a culture that brings out the narcissistic behavior in all of us."*

The psychologist Terry Cooper writes this, *"The desire to have a profound self-confidence without any self-development is becoming obvious in our culture. Self-esteem becomes a new form of entitlement. We have a right to feel good about ourselves."*

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying we live in a society that believes the solution to society's problems is to tell people they're great whether or not they actually are. What happens as a result is that it unintentionally minimizes the motivation for self-improvement and leaves many of us in a destructive cycle. Why should I try to get better when I'm already perfect in every single way?

But all the focus on building-self esteem hasn't produced the fruit it promised. For instance, there's been a five-fold increase in plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures in just ten years. (And by the way, in 2016 the greatest increase in cosmetic surgery was for teenage male breast reduction). The growth of celebrity gossip magazines went through the roof, Americans for the first time started spending more money than they made, racking up huge amounts of debt to finance the growing sizes of houses. The number of people who said being rich is important started to climb as well as the number of people who cheated on their spouse. People weren't becoming more content, they were becoming more self-obsessed, anxious, lonely and isolated.

Now, I'm sure there are some people that say, "Maybe, but look at how miserable Christians are! They're judgmental and hypocritical and always feeling guilty! They're no better!" When someone says that, I say, "You watch too much TV!" I know a lot of Christians, and very few of them are anything like that. And the ones that are, their life tends to look a lot like the Gospel of Self with a Christian veneer.

How do you know you follow the right gospel? Look at your life. What is the fruit of your faith? Jesus said you don't become that way by focusing on self. The Christians I know who embody the Gospel of Jesus are peaceful, caring, accepting, gracious, generous and whole-hearted. In fact, I would describe their character this way, **"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."** (Gal 5:22)

In fact, there's a word for focusing on someone else's needs over your own—the word is LOVE. The path to being great is not to love yourself, it's to love others.

If we all lived Jesus' way, it would transform our society. Rather than pulling us apart like it did with the disciples, it brings people together. This is something I always tell couples in pre-marital counseling.

Let's say you're married and both of you believe it's the other's job to make you happy. How will you interact with each other? Well, you'll spend your time critiquing how they're doing and you'll focus on which of your needs aren't being met. And I know because I've tried this...you'll become increasingly miserable and find yourself repeating the mantra of the Gospel of Self, "I deserve better," and you might start looking for excuses to get out. It will tear you apart.

And this is a microcosm of what the Gospel of Self does. It creates a culture full of people who are always demanding, "I deserve better!"

Now, think about the opposite. What if each of you was focused on serving the other? What if your mantra was, "YOU deserve better!" What if the arguments you got into were about who could serve the other better? When you look at them, you'd see their beauty and worth. You get to see them happy and fulfilled. And when you look at yourself, you see the ways in which you could become even better. This should be the attitude for anyone who calls themselves a follower of Jesus.

Now, you might wonder, how does someone live a life like that? How can someone wake up in the morning and ask what they can do to make other people's lives better? How do we overcome the natural tendency to focus on self?

Well, we can only do it if our foundation is the gospel of Jesus. And that's a different foundation than the Gospel of Self. You see the foundation of the Gospel of Self is that there's nothing wrong with you. You're perfect the way you are. But the foundation of the gospel of Jesus is that there IS something wrong with you, but God loves you anyway.

You see, no matter how much self-talk you do about how great you are, deep down, you know better. I know it sounds really good to tell people they're perfect, but we all have a deep sense that it's just not true.

We don't even have to believe in some transcendent law to know this, we don't even live up to our own standards, let alone God's. How often do you determine that you won't overeat, but you can't help yourself? How often do you go to bed saying, "I'm going to get up early in the morning and run?" The Gospel of Self is a noble lie that's always exposed sooner or later. I know some of you are thinking, "How is this helping?"

Well, here's what the Gospel of Jesus says. The reason you're disappointed in yourself is because you have an innate sense that you were made for something more than what you've become. That's because, like it says in Ephesians 2:10, **"You are God's masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works."**

But the reason you're disappointed is that you know that there's something broken about you. The Bible calls this sin—it simply means to “miss the mark.” And this is not reserved for murderers and rapists and drug-dealers, we all miss the mark. But Romans 5:8 says, **“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

But here's how Matthew 20 says it. Verse 28, **“Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** The truth is, *“We deserve worse, but because of Jesus, God gave us better than we deserve.”*

Ironically, the only way we don't get better than we deserve is when we deny there's anything wrong. If we want to stand before God and say, “Look at how great I am! Give me what I deserve.” He'll let us do that. And it'll be hell because we'll be constantly comparing ourselves to others, trying to prove our worth.

But when I can accept, “I'm not all that great. Not really,” but can also recognize how amazing God is that he accepts me anyway, then what happens is that my foundation for serving others isn't trying to prove anything or earn anything. It's simply gratitude to my heavenly father. And when we serve in love and gratitude, the result is peace, happiness and fulfillment.