

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Fitting “Self” into Service

(Isaiah 36-39; Gospels)

Introduction: “Lightning” vs. “lightning bug”...

“I say let the world go to hell, but I should always have my tea.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*

So there I was, giving a lesson on sermon preparation to some Russian preachers in Nizhnekamsk, Russia. I was trying to make a point about the importance of working hard to make proper word choice when bringing a message.

So, I turned to one of my favorite muses, Mark Twain, who had made a comment in one of his works that the difference between “the almost right word” and the “right word” is the difference between “lightning” and “a lightning bug.”

So I said that, in English, waiting for the translator to render my sentence into Russian. He - a VERY savvy translator who had great familiarity with American culture - just looked at me as if to say, “*You’re kidding, right?*”

What I had said about lightning and lightning bugs made sense in English, but was untranslatable into Russian.

The translator and I laughed about it later, and I never did figure out how to get across to the students the importance of choosing just the right word to get across a point with force.

But the point is well worth making. Every one of us today knows the importance of being precise in our speech. Words make a difference.

Every word has its own meaning. Different words - even words that sound similar, can have vastly different meanings.

This morning we’re going to explore two very similar sounding words and the difference between them. As it turns out, the difference between these two words makes a world of difference.

Today, for the third Sunday in a row, I’m again beating the drum of service.

On June 3rd I spoke about a vision for our church becoming a community where everybody serves, where everybody is “on mission” for the Great Commission, everybody is all about meeting needs in Jesus’ Name - either here at the church, in the community, or in both places.

Then, last weekend my message touched on the danger of service as a legalistic obligation, the kind of service rendered by the older brother in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal sons. As we consider serving our Father, we are to never forget His heart for lost people AND we are never to forget that WE, now found, were once lost ourselves.

This morning, I’m again beating the drum for service, but I’m coming at it from a quite different angle.

Recently I’ve been reading through the book of Isaiah. The book is a compilation of Isaiah’s prophecies, spanning the decades of his ministry in Judah.

As I read, I was impressed by the hard-hitting calls to repentance, the messages of judgment on the nations and on Israel for her sin. With rare exception, these messages are framed in prophetic language. Chapter after chapter after chapter of poetic prophecy.

And then, abruptly, the poetry ends at chapter 36. Isaiah shifts to story-telling and there is narrative from chapter 36 through chapter 39 as he tells the story of King Hezekiah.

Let’s spend a minute getting acquainted with King Hezekiah. Prepare yourself for a picture-perfect image of the ugliness of selfishness.

Selfishness...

King Hezekiah's Good Reign

On this Father's Day, it is sad to report that Hezekiah was the son of a wicked father and the father of an exceptionally wicked son. But Hezekiah himself goes down in history as a good king, one of the better kings of the southern kingdom of Judah.

He served the Lord and not the false gods that so many of the other Jewish kings worshiped. We read of Hezekiah's righteous deeds at the beginning of his biography in 2 Kings 18.

For one, he removed the "high places". These were sites set up on the tops of hills that the people used to offer sacrifices to idols. He also broke down sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah - objects used for the same idolatrous purposes.

He also tore down the bronze serpent (Nehushtan) that God had told Moses to make that stemmed the plague of serpents, a story recorded in the book of Numbers. (chapter 21) That bronze serpent had originally been an object that promoted faith in God's salvation. But, by the time of Hezekiah it had become an actual object of worship, an idol. So, it having outlived its usefulness, Hezekiah rightly destroyed it.

Finally, King Hezekiah opposed the Philistines, a warlike group of tribes from five cities in Palestine that had been a thorn in Israel's side from the beginning of the Jews' national life.

Oh, there was a minor breakthrough when David fought Goliath, but that had been hundreds of years earlier. Since the time of Solomon Israel had pursued a sort of "live and let live" policy with the Philistines, which translated into a "be polluted and pollute" policy, for the Philistines were notoriously evangelistic in their immorality and idolatry.

Hezekiah's defeat of them was only partial, but it did show a resolve to purify the land.

His life is summarized in 2 Kings 18, *[5] He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the*

kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. [6] For he clung to the Lord; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord had commanded Moses.

The story of King Hezekiah emerges in the book of Isaiah at chapter 36.

King Hezekiah's Test

The Assyrian threat (36:1--37:38)

Hezekiah, trusting in God, had refused to pay protection money (also called "tribute") to Assyria. It's sort of like standing up to the bully at school and refusing to give him your lunch money - but at a national level.

Hezekiah's courage was commendable, but it prompted Assyria to send an army to destroy Jerusalem.

On their way from Assyria, the army, led by General Rabshekah, ransacked the northern kingdom of Israel. It took them three years to do it, but they finally destroyed Israel - and then they continued marching south into Judah to attack King Hezekiah and the capitol city of Jerusalem.

The story of the confrontation between Assyria and Hezekiah takes two full chapters to tell (Isaiah 36 and 37). This morning, unfortunately, we don't have time to go into great detail. But here are the highlights.

First, Rabshekah gave a threatening speech that was intended to frighten the king into surrender without a fight. When the content of the speech was brought back to Hezekiah, he sought the counsel of the prophet Isaiah.¹

Isaiah responded by sending a message back to Hezekiah, urging him to continue to trust God. "Don't give up! God will deliver! Rabshekah and his king, Sennacherib, will be defeated!"

¹ There is the one really touching scene where King Hezekiah actually lays out a threatening letter from the Assyrians before the Lord in the Temple and says, "Look, LORD, at their threats against us. Protect us!"

And that is exactly what happened. In one night the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 men of the Assyrian army that had camped outside the walls of Jerusalem. And when the king, Sennachareb, returned to Assyria, he was killed in a palace coup by two of his own sons.

Isaiah broke into his poetic prophesying to recount this tremendous deliverance of the nation, a deliverance that was only possible by God's intervening power.

But his storytelling isn't over. He next tells us how God blessed Hezekiah, personally, after the good King fell deathly ill.

Healed of a deadly disease (38:1-22)

Prophecy of a soon-to-come death (v. 1)

[1] In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.'"

That was an exceptionally clear message from the Lord. But Hezekiah did not want to die. He wanted to live! So he prayed, fervently, for life.

A prayer for God's healing (vv. 2-3)

[2] Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the Lord, [3] and said, "Remember now, O Lord, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Well, God listened to the prayer of this godly king. The Lord spoke to Isaiah and Isaiah brought the word of the Lord back to Hezekiah.

God miraculously healed Hezekiah! (v. 5)

[5] "Thus says the Lord, the God of your father David, 'I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life.'"

God's promise that Hezekiah would live and not die was validated by a miracle (the sun's shadow backtracked ten steps on a stairway!) and was received with gratitude by Hezekiah.

So, we have seen God's great blessings poured out on Hezekiah. He was delivered from the Assyrian threat AND he was delivered from a terminal disease.

But the narrative Isaiah tells of Hezekiah is not yet finished. And the final part of Hezekiah's story is not pretty.

When revealing reveals so much (39:1-8)

Babylonians with a "Glad You're Well" visit (v. 1)

[1] At that time Berodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick.

After his miraculous recovery, the king received a visit from representatives of the ascending world power, the Babylonians.

They even brought a "You Got Well" present to Hezekiah, which pleased the king greatly. And to show them how pleased he was he opened the doors to the treasuries of Jerusalem.

Hezekiah treated the delegation from Babylon to quite an eye full.

Hezekiah's "show and tell" (v. 2)

[2] Hezekiah was pleased, and showed them all his treasure house, the silver and the gold and the spices and the precious oil and his whole armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them.

Clearly, this was d-u-m-b. He should NOT have showed all the wealth of the kingdom to the Babylonians.

And given that he was not politically stupid, we wonder WHY he did it.² His act did nothing more than serve as an engraved invitation to Babylon to take military action against Israel to come and get the treasure.³

When Isaiah the prophet heard what Hezekiah had done, he immediately saw the handwriting on the wall and he told the king how it was all going to play out.

The handwriting on the wall (vv. 5-7)

[5] Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the Lord of hosts, [6] ‘Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,’ says the Lord. [7] ‘And some of your sons who shall issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away; and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.’”

What awful news - and how awful on so many levels.

Hezekiah’s descendants - royal descendants of the line of David and Solomon - will be forced to leave the land of promise. His grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be forced to go to Babylon.

Hezekiah’s wealth will be ripped away from his nation. The treasury of the Temple will be looted by the Babylonians.

And if all of this is going to happen, it must mean that the nation itself - Jerusalem! - will be sacked by the Babylonians.

This will be the devastation that Hezekiah has been hearing Isaiah prophecy about for years. The Kingdom of God will finally be destroyed,

² After all, he had skillfully negotiated the nation of Israel through very turbulent times.

³ The treasures Hezekiah showed were to have been used for worship and mercy. His “show and tell” was a prideful attempt to use the treasures to build his own reputation and name. What should Hezekiah have done with the gold and silver of the Kingdom’s treasury? Used them for the glory of God in worship. Used them for the benefit of the people.

and the destruction will come about because he showed Babylon the kingdom’s treasure!

It would be difficult to imagine worse news coming to the king of God’s people. But notice Hezekiah’s response

It’s all about me (?) (v. 8)

[8] Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good.” For he thought, “For there will be peace and truth in my days.”

Hezekiah heard the news that the Kingdom of God was going to be torn apart. God’s work would be destroyed.

He heard that the Babylonian captivity was coming, his descendants would be taken to Babylon, and would suffer tremendously.

And Hezekiah heard that all of that would occur AFTER he’s dead and gone - and then concluded, “*It’s all good. If it’s OK with me, it’s OK.*”

Hmmm...

Thinking about selfishness...

Something about that looks ugly, doesn’t it. And, clearly, what is ugly about it is that it is a display of world class selfishness.

King Hezekiah’s selfishness is seen in a couple of ways here. First, that he is solely concerned for himself. Second, he is wholly unconcerned about the welfare of either his descendants or God’s kingdom.

It sort of makes you stop and wonder what was behind Hezekiah’s long life of good works and good leadership, doesn’t it? Was it really ever about anything other than protecting his own world from harm?

It’s been said that the smallest package in the world is a man all wrapped up in himself. By that measure, Hezekiah looks like a pretty small package.

Throughout the Bible, there are lots and lots of warnings against selfishness (and its cousin, greed).⁴

Illustration orienting to the ugliness of selfishness, something funny, orienting to capitalism, but note that there have been some famously selfish Maxists and socialists, too.

Selfishness is bad. And while it may take a crisis to bring it to the surface, in the end, if we are, at root, selfish, that selfishness will become obvious. When the chips are down we will be willing to run roughshod over others. When our backs are to the wall we will show that we are not really concerned for others. We will show that God and His work and His kingdom are really not all that important to us.

That's what we see in Hezekiah and his example stands as a warning to not be selfish.

And now I'm going to throw you a curve...

While selfishness is bad, there is another "self" word that is not bad. Jesus appealed to it regularly as a motivator to us to follow Him and to serve. We would, therefore, be foolish to think it is bad.

The "self" word I have in mind is "self-interest" and while the two words - "selfishness" and "self-interest" - might sound similar, they are as different as "lightning" is from "lightning bug."

...Self-Interest

Jesus - and Self-Interest

⁴ For example - *[Proverbs 23:6] Do not eat the bread of a selfish man, Or desire his delicacies;*

[7] For as he thinks within himself, so he is. He says to you, "Eat and drink!" But his heart is not with you. [8] You will vomit up the morsel you have eaten, And waste your compliments.

[Philippians 2:3] Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves

[James 3:14] But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

The most loving Man who ever lived, Jesus, had a lot to say about selfishness, condemning it over and over again.

But Jesus also had a lot to say about acting out of self-interest, and He NEVER condemned that. In fact, I'm going to now do something that I rarely do. But on a theme as important and as pervasive as this one is throughout the Gospels, it is certainly the right thing to do.

I'm going to simply read a few verses, direct from the lips of Jesus, where we get to hear Him speak to the theme of you and me acting out of self-interest.

The Beatitude: Blessing for character in tune with God's kingdom

[Matthew 5:3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [4] "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. [5] "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. [6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. [7] "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. [8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. [9] "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. [10] "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [11] "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. [12] "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."⁵

Reward for giving to the poor

[Matthew 6:1] "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your

⁵ *[Luke 6:20] And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. [21] "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. [22] "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. [23] "Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets.*

Father who is in heaven. [2] “So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. [3] “But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, [4] so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”⁶

Reward for praying

[Matthew 6:5] “When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. [6] “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Reward for fasting

[Matthew 6:16] “Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. [17] “But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face [18] so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Store up for yourself treasure in Heaven

[Matthew 6:19] “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. [20] “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; [21] for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Reward for seeking FIRST God’s Kingdom

⁶ [Luke 12:33] “Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys.

[Matthew 6:33] “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Reward for helping the needy/thirsty

[Matthew 10:42] “And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.”

Reward for following Him

[Matthew 11:28] “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. [29] “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. [30] “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Reward for losing our lives for His sake

[Matthew 16:24] Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. [25] “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”⁷

Reward for giving up riches in this life

[Mark 10:28] Peter began to say to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You.” [29] Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, [30] but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and

⁷ [Mark 8:35] “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. [36] “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?

[Luke 9:23] And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. [24] “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.

brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. [31] “But many who are first will be last, and the last, first.”⁸

Reward for loving our enemies

[Luke 6:35] “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.

Reward of the Holy Spirit for praying

[Luke 11:11] “Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? [12] “Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? [13] “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?”

Reward for blessing those who can't repay

[Luke 14:12] And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. [13] “But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame,

⁸ *[Matthew 19:27] Then Peter said to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” [28] And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. [29] “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. [Luke 18:28] Peter said, “Behold, we have left our own homes and followed You.” [29] And He said to them, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, [30] who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life.”*

the blind, [14] and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Point made?

Clearly, there is not only nothing wrong with the idea of doing something for a reward for God, there is everything RIGHT with it!

Transition:

Serving, You, and Self-Interest - to the Glory of God

Serving and eternal reward

Serving and peace/fulfillment

Knowing that you are making a difference for God.
Knowing that you are making an impact in someone else's life
Joy that comes from living a purposefully.

Conclusion:

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

(Jim Elliott, martyred missionary, featured in the book, The Shadow of the Almighty and in the movie, “The End of the Spear”)

To be moved to serve on the basis of self-interest requires faith, the one thing without which we cannot please God.
Speak to the beauty of being concerned more for others than for personal welfare.
Speak to the high privilege of investing in God's eternal kingdom

How might we/do we evidence this same mindset today?
Civilization depends on the current generation caring more about the next one than their own.

We have gotten ours. What do we care if the rest get theirs?
 We have received Christmas presents; we have become recipients. It is expected that we will put these gifts to use.
 We have received gifts from God.
 With our reception of these gifts we are responsible, too.

We've seen the ugliness of self-centeredness/selfishness. For the time remaining we are going to focus on the beauty of a life centered on love and God's kingdom.

God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him.
 Christian hedonism - John Piper
 We can no more act against our self-interest than we can breathe water.
 Philosophy discussions about all chosen behavior being out of self-interest.
 Mark 8:35-36 - CS Lewis' most quoted verses, where Jesus appeals to self-interest as a motive for self-denial.
 Unless we have a sufficient reason to sacrifice something we love, the cost will always be too great. Jesus gives us sufficient reason to pay the cost.
 First, if we try to "save" our lives by seeking our own selfish pleasures in our own way, we will lose (what is in our self-interest) our eternal life and the fullness of life right now. Second, if we "lose" our lives—give them away to Christ and others—we will gain not only eternal life, but fullness of life in the present.

From The Problem of Pain - "We are afraid that Heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to. There are rewards that do not sully motives. A man's love for a woman is not mercenary because he wants to marry her, nor his love for poetry mercenary because he wants to read it, nor his love of exercise less disinterested because he wants to run and leap and walk. Love, by its very nature, seeks to enjoy its object.

From The Weight of Glory - "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink, sex, and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants

to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased

Jim Elliot, martyred missionary, famously echoes this eternal choice: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."¹

This Sunday, I want to hit the service theme once again, but from an entirely different angle. I want to warn against selfishness - something that the Bible frequently condemns - while casting a vision for service by reminding the congregation that serving God, being "on mission for the Great Commission" and meeting people's needs in Jesus' Name is, in a very good way, in our self-interest.

I want to proceed by showing the ugliness of selfishness. First, with a contemporary, perhaps funny illustration, and then with the story of Hezekiah and his clear and sole agenda that all go well with him. (could throw in stories of Abraham and Isaac trying to pawn off their wives as their sisters so that they wouldn't suffer; maybe some other biblical illustrations)

But I want to show that different words mean different things - lightning and lightning bug (Mark Twain) or some other such near homonym.

I want to introduce the idea that self-interest is not the same thing as selfishness by showing (maybe even just reading) the various verses that quote Jesus as casting a vision for following Him, giving up our lives for Him, etc... with the promise that it will be for our good to do so.

End by enumerating the ways in which being "on mission for the Great Commission", meeting needs in Jesus' Name, serving, while sometimes exhausting, will result in our good, both now and into eternity, the future.