

Sermon Text for June 15, 2025

By: Dr. David Bronkema

Putting Others Before Ourselves: Are We Taking Seriously Jesus' Challenge To Do That? First Presbyterian Church of Strasburg

It is so good to be here with you today, and Happy Father's Day to all. Robin and I, and we are joined by your youngest son Josiah today as well, and we always so enjoy fellowshiping and worshipping with Bob and Stacy and their kids and you when we are here.

As we heard from the three Scripture passages read today, we are commanded to love and put others before ourselves. As I've wrestled for many, many years with what this actually means, what it actually looks like in a variety of situations both personally and in my role in a variety of organizations, I've come to the conclusion that there are three dimensions to this that we might have a hard time seeing in our lives and work, that might be a bit hidden from our sight from time to time.

So, I'm going to start off by telling three stories, each of which illustrates one of these dimensions, and as I tell these stories, I'd love for you to think about whether these are things that strike a chord in you. Then, going to Scripture, I'll explore how the Bible gives us insights into what actions we can take towards, as two of the passages say, becoming more perfect, acting more like Jesus would like us to.

Here is the first story.

I love to do many things, and as you know from my brother Bob over these years, one of those is to play and coach sports. And, one of the things I enjoyed the most over the years is watching my kids play sports or, in Emily's case, dancing. I truly believe that sports are part of God's kingdom and his plan for us, and that God uses them in many ways for discipleship purposes. But, at the same time, sports have led me to do, say, think, and feel things that have been, shall we say, less than Christian. Let me give you an example.

My son Jacob, now in graduate school, was a pretty good basketball player in high school. But, in 8th grade, he spent a lot of time sitting on the bench. I thought he deserved more playing time, and that the team would be better off with him on the floor, and from time to time I found myself slightly wishing that his teammates on the floor would mess up so that the coach would put him in, or so that the coach would realize that keeping Jacob on the bench was a bad choice.

Now, I don't think this was jealousy. Yes, I wanted to see him play. But, I think I know the game, and I've been pretty good at analyzing when my children do have it, and when they don't. I thought that the team would be better off with him out there. Which led to me feeling that way: want others not to do as well.

Do you ever find yourself feeling that way? How about around politics: don't want the party, or a particular politician, or a particular war effort, or a particular policy to do well? And, actually, you want them to fail, you want things to go wrong, so that you can be proven right, so that your party, your politician, your policy, to be given the opportunity to do things the way you think they should be done?

The point is, you think you are right, at sometimes so right that you are outraged by what others are doing (coach, politicians, parties), that you want their efforts and the efforts of others to fail.

Which leads me to the second story.

I've been blessed to work with Christian relief, and development organizations, organizations working on helping others in times of need, and on poverty and justice issues, helping them figure out whether and how to measure the spiritual impact that they have. In other words, these organizations when they are working with the poor, also are trying to help them to grow spiritually, to become closer to Christ, and one of the questions is how can you tell if they are having this kind of spiritual impact.

I had a chance to work with one that had created a wonderful pilot project to see how they might do a better job of measuring their spiritual impact, and went to communities around the world and asked them what they thought would be evidence of spiritual progress in their communities. They used surveys and focus groups where they talked with people, and had come up with a great way of analyzing the data and putting it into categories in a way that would measure spiritual progress well. But, the problem was that they didn't want to share this approach with other organizations, probably because they felt that the other organizations were their competitors, that they could use this great approach they had developed to apply for grants, that it made them stand out from the others.

Have you ever felt this way? Are there competitors out there (for them, it was other nonprofits, for me and my program it might be other academic programs, for you it might be other churches) where you want to hold on to things? And, perhaps, as in the first story, where you hope it does not go so well for them? How about if you run a business? That gets really tricky. What about that special recipe that you only share with a privileged few?

The point is that we want to hold on to things that could be a great blessing to others, out of fear of competition or because of something that makes us feel special. That is another hidden dimension of the challenge of putting others before ourselves. This is different from the first story, where we feel we are right; in this one, we feel that we have a right to keep and bolster our competitive advantage in a competitive marketplace, so we don't share, we don't encourage others. And, it can also lead to not wanting others to do well so we get a larger share of the market, or we keep our special reputation.

And, the third story.

Back in graduate school, Robin and I had two couples with whom we were particularly close. I played basketball with the guys (there is a theme here, as you can see), and we had a bible study all together once a week. One time, during a conversation we were having the wife of my friend asked him if he would run to the store to get her something. He said no. I was a bit puzzled by that, and asked him about it later. He explained to me that it was dangerous to do those kinds of things, because the wife would then become accustomed to it and expect that from him more often.

We argued a bit over that, and I think that argue is the right word, and he was just not convinced that in fact, we should all be accustomed and expect from our spouses that they would go out of their way for us, that they would put us first, and vice-versa. You notice how I use his blind spot as opposed to giving a story that involves me and my blind spots to how I have failed to put my wife first in many occasions, but that is for another time.

The point is, and even though this dimension may not be quite as hidden in theory, have you felt that way? That what is being asked of you is too inconvenient, is not reasonable, and can lead to expectations that are not healthy? Have you examined those feelings, along with how you may be blind to the way that you are putting your time, your desires, your wishes above those of others?

So, we have three stories, with three different dimensions of challenge in putting others first:

1. hoping that others fail when you think that you have righteousness on your side;
2. engaging in competitive behavior rather than sharing with and encouraging those who you see and society encourages you to see as your competitors;
3. and not going out of your way to do things for others.

Now, what does the Bible say about this, and how might it help guide us to tackle these things seriously? There were three passages that I was led to as I explored this topic for today, and they were read earlier in the service.

The first has to do with loving our enemies and praying for them. If we do this, what happens? In the process we become more perfect, more holy, it helps us act like children of God. Let me read that passage again:

Matthew 5:43-48: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

So, let's build up this habit together: whenever we are feeling outraged by what somebody has done, whenever we are wishing that somebody or somebody's policies or actions will fail, whether it be a coach, a politician, or somebody else, I encourage us all to immediately turn to praying for them and to ask God to take that feeling away from us. I can tell you that has helped me, and let's just take a moment of silence. Think about whether you have been struggling with any of these kinds of feelings, and commit the object of them to the Lord in prayer, as well as the feelings themselves.

The second passage has to do with giving away things that we believe are foundational to our well-being, and that this action also leads us towards perfection, towards being more holy. This passage seems to me to help speak towards that second challenge I identified, that of wanting to hold on to things that give us a competitive advantage and nurturing that competition instead of sharing our foundational resources with others. There is a great book about this by Peter Greer, CEO of HOPE International, called *Rooting for Rivals* that talks about this, and urges us to see others not as competitors, but as those who have a role to play in building up God's kingdom, and calls us to what he calls "radical generosity." Let me read that passage again:

Matthew 19:16-23: Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments." "Which ones?" he inquired. Jesus replied, "'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" "All these I have

kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

So, let’s also build this habit together: in whatever area we identify people as competitors, let’s challenge ourselves to prayerfully see them as co-laborers and share with them abundantly and freely, giving up what seems to be the foundation of your competitive security, being radically generous. Let’s take another moment of silence, and during it, think about and identify whether there is some area where you can be doing this.

The third passage in a sense is the umbrella for the other two, and really does not need anything else other than a reminder to challenge ourselves: are we going out of our way, and that is the key, going out of our way, to do things for others, no matter how inconvenient it is, no matter how much we think it might set a precedent that may lead people to make even further demands on us down the line? Let me read that passage again:

Philippians 2:3-4: Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Let’s take one more moment of silence to think about and identify and recommit any area you may be, or should be, struggling with this.

Brothers and sisters, as we struggle with these dimensions of putting others before ourselves in terms of our temptations to want to see others and what they are doing fail because of our feelings of righteousness, to market ourselves and our organizations and not share freely and openly about and with our presumed competitors, and to not go out of our way to serve others, let us be intentional about tackling each and every one of these things through prayer and action and thereby struggle to be perfect, knowing that Christ loves us, has given us the Spirit to help us do so, will give us the abundant and blessed life He has promised us in this journey here on earth as we do so, and will use us to build up his kingdom and bring others to the saving knowledge of him through the witness of our efforts.

Amen