

Sermon Series: Walk Wisely



#5 A Strong Sense of Self

A new feature film version of Jane Austen's, *Emma*, is showing in cinemas right now. You may think that this light, white, foppish 19th century adaptation of a 200-year-old story unfit for today, yet it's rating at 90% on Rotten Tomatoes!



The heroine, Emma, is a self-deluded wealthy young adult with the leisure and power to meddle in the lives of her small village. She is the epitome of an **over-inflated ego**.¹ For example, Austen writes,

“With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny.”

Emma was written at a time when the Western **sense of self** was undergoing a **huge makeover** – transitioning from when sense of self was found in relation to one's family or community or role to the **modern view** where self is found by looking deep **inside** one's own thoughts and convictions.²

If we believe Christians should be self-**less**, what sense of “self” should we have? Does denying oneself to take up one's cross³ mean that **we should obliterate any sense of self?**

Self – ancient and modern

In many **ancient cultures** a person's sense of self came mostly from **without**. That is, ask someone from past, “Who are you?” and would say “I am a son” or “I am a mother” or “I belong to this tribe” or this profession. Security of self was found in



¹ Writing at the beginning of the 19th Century, Austen is said to have changed fiction forever in this novel. The reader shares in Emma's delusions of hubris and her designs to manipulate others for her own glory and entertainment as the main character moves freely and regularly from speaking in the 1st person to speaking in the 3rd person.

² E.g. Emma says at one point to her 17-year-old protégé, Harriet, “You must be the best judge of your own happiness.”

³ A metaphor Jesus attaches to discipleship e.g. Luke 9:23

corporate identity by what others thought of us and how we fit in to a family, a community, and God. Broadly speaking, men and women found **themselves** in the face of **others**.

By contrast, **Western modernity** taught the opposite. A so-called “expressive individualism”⁴ born in the 19th century and commercialized in the 20th says self is strong not by sublimating personal needs for others, but by **looking inward**.

We are encouraged to detach from and leave home, differentiate ourselves from the norms of society and religious institutions. We must **bow to no idol but our own power to choose** and determine our own identity and destiny.

The late Robert Bellah, sociologist at Berkeley, said of this modern self, “each person has a **unique core of feeling and intuition** that should unfold or be expressed if individuality (or identity) is to be realized.”

The “self” and the cross

The ancients looked **outward** into the face of **others** for a sense of self, moderns look **inward**, but Christians then and now are offered a **third way – to look up!** The Apostle Paul urges Christians in Philippians chapter 2



“... if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ... (be) like-minded, (have) the same love, (be) one in spirit and of one mind. 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.”

Note in verses 1-4 how connectedness with Christ⁵ by faith is **the key** to a healthy self **and** a healthy community. Knowing Jesus re-sets our **inward** view of self and re-calibrates the **outwardly** informed social self as well.

Paul’s own sense of self

⁴ See *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah

⁵ Christ is Greek for the Hebrew Word “Messiah” being God’s foretold anointed one. In the New Testament Jesus takes this name Christ and is recognised by many as God come down to us, taking on human life for our salvation and wholeness e.g. John 1:1-14

The Apostle Paul revealed the secret of his own strong sense of self in Christ in his interactions with the Early Church. For example, the Corinthian church was filled with divisions.



Different groups at Corinth competed for the favour of one spiritual leader **over another**, forming factions that led to great failures.⁶ In **seeking to heal** their divisions Paul left us with clues about **his own self-regard**. In 1 Corinthians 4 we read...

“³I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me...”

1 Cor. 4:3-5

A huge problem in the Corinthian Church was hubris, in the case above exhibited in a necessity to be associated with the “better” church leader.

C.S. Lewis differentiates pride as a destructive force from a general sense of “being proud”⁷ in this way in his chapter on pride in *Mere Christianity*...

“Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only of **having more of it than the next person**. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about.”

Jane Austen’s *Emma* said it well, “It is very difficult for the prosperous to be humble.”

Paul’s own understanding of how pride like this can be reversed in polarity came from the power of the Gospel at work in his own heart.⁸ And so in 1 Corinthians 4 he tells the Corinthian Church (in vss. 6 and 7)...

⁶ E.g. 1 Corinthians 3. Soren Kierkegaard in *Sickness Unto Death* wrote about the dysfunction and pain in the human ego because we seek to replace God as our source of identity and in God’s place to put our own capacity to create self-worth and meaning and our competence to run our lives.

⁷ What’s the big deal in the Bible about **pride** or hubris? Let’s not be confused – Paul is not talking of our sons and daughters delighting in their achievements at school, or a sense of worth after cooking a good meal or painting a fine portrait. These examples point to a good sense of pride.

⁸ See Paul’s own testimony of this in Philippians 3

“⁶ ...I have **applied these things to myself**... (Do) not be **puffed up** in being a follower of one of us over against the other. ⁷ For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”

Paul uses a rare Greek word (“*physioo*”) instead of *hubris*. It means **overinflated**, swollen or distended beyond proper size. It was used in ancient times for **bellows** – so Paul is talking of human pride like something full of hot air, empty, painful, fragile – **it may burst at any moment!** 140 years of modern psychology informs us of how painful that can be to the **human ego** and how destructive to **communities**.

The path to a strong sense of self

How then did Paul “**apply these things**” to himself? How was it that he could be free from the tyranny of the harsh opinion of others, and not crushed also by the terrible responsibility of finding the “real” Paul within? Was he simply a superior thinker to past and future psychologists? Does Christianity offer anything different to what our neighbours might do? Is there a **godly plan available to all for a strong sense of self?**

Many **counsellors** today tell people to simply **not** listen to what others say. The only thing that should concern me, they say, is what **I think about me**. I should rely, they say, on my own inner opinion of **who and what I want to be**.

Jane Austen’s Emma says to her protégé, Harriet, “**You** must be the best judge of **your own happiness**.” It sounds contemporary. But so too does Harriet’s subsequent depression and bewilderment about life as a result!

What if I, like Paul, discover when searching deep within that I have much **not to be proud of; that there is much that is not attractive?** Is introspection my only avenue for a sense of self?

In Paul’s summation, introspection alone **trapped him** as equally as bowing to the trolling of his outward enemies. In the light of the Gospel though, self-understanding came **not from his own thinking** but through the **extraordinary**

power of God’s grace to him in Christ. Paul’s own testimony of this in his Letter to the Philippians is clear.⁹ He says...

“I want to know Christ – yes, to know the **power of his resurrection** and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil. 3:10-11)

Paul’s conversion to become a follower of Jesus exposed the sin of pride in him and replaced it with a new persona; one loved, pardoned, humbled and re-oriented in purpose and character. His discipleship connected him to a **source of self-understanding** not merely from within, not only in the face of others, but from God.

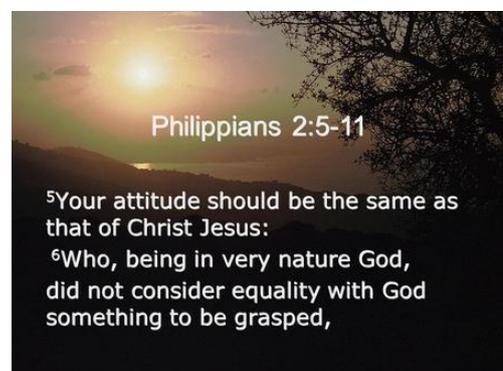
In his interactions with the **puffed-up Corinthian Christians** Paul, in contrast to those causing division, put **the opinion of God** above all others and above himself as his source of primary **self-understanding**. In Christ, Paul knew that his former sins were no longer attached like barnacles to the hull. His new sense of identity in the light of the Gospel led him to say “I don’t care what you think. I have a very low opinion of your opinion of me – but I also have a very low opinion of *my* opinion of me!”

His is not a delusion of perfection or superiority like Jane Austen’s Emma. Instead, he says his conscience is clear (vs. 4) even if he knows he is not innocent or faultless. By grace, relies on God’s pardon to him in Christ **and the restoring work of the Spirit** in his new way of living (“walking wisely – Eph. 5:15).

Paul’s way to a strong and godly sense of self is clear in Philippians chapter 2.

In response to God’s grace to free him from sin and self he recommends the **example of Jesus as the path** for best putting God’s grace to work on a strong sense of self.

Humility was despised as a show of weakness in Hellenistic culture, yet Paul commends the very pattern of Jesus’ life as the right response to this grace given him.



⁹ See also, the story of Paul’s conversion to Christ in Acts chapter 9

It is the opposite way to that destructive pride at work in the human heart and psyche that is an expression of the sin and its results that Jesus died on the cross to save us from.

So, while some look **outside** to others for a strong sense of self and others look deep **inside**, Christians are urged to **look “up” first** - that is, to Christ by faith - and to learn to let the “self” God creates in us by grace grow and develop as our new and true identity. As God’s Spirit assists us, we may be less trapped by and see more objectively opinions of others, and begin to renovate the opinion we have of ourselves on the inside.

A great insight into the way to identify, develop and practice this new strong sense of self offered us in Christ is explained in a brief booklet written by Timothy Keller from Redeemer Church, New York City, USA. Here’s a link to the details...

https://www.koorong.com/product/the-freedom-of-self-forgetfulness-the-path-to_9781906173418

Paul writes this of our new status and identity in Christ in Romans 8...

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ 16 (God’s Spirit bears) witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.