November 27, 2022

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MY PROBLEM WITH GOLF

John 2:13-25

Recently Laurie and I had our 3 granddaughters spend the night at our house. We are happy that this is still considered a big treat by the girls, one they lobby their parents for frequently. One incident occurred during their stay with us that you have undoubtedly seen a version of if you have ever spent time with children. Our daughter, Carissa, invested some of her precious allowance money in Barbie dolls when she was little. Laurie had the wisdom to save them. Who knew that they would be a big hit with future generations of our family? I guess she did. Had it been up to me we’d have sent those dolls to the island of misfit toys a long time ago. Fortunately Laurie is wiser than I am. Not only did I not foresee that our grandchildren would want to play with these dolls, I had no idea that they would be an appreciating asset. I say they are appreciating because it seems that investment has grown. Carissa had a few of those dolls, but it seems like we have more than a few now. It seems like we have hundreds of them, and it feels like they are multiplying.

Anyway, that day Cara and Ella were playing with Barbies in the living room. I was in another room, and while I didn’t know what was going on I recognized the sounds of an escalating conflict. There was a disagreement going on, and the level of hostilities was clearly climbing, as evidenced by the rising decibel level. Laurie intervened. It turned out that the cause of the conflict was that both girls wanted to play with one particular Barbie doll. Both girls had to have this particular doll. This was odd since they were surrounded by an ocean of Barbies. But both of them absolutely had to have this one doll. Adult logic consisting of pointing out there were lots of other Barbies, all of which were just as good as this one, so why not just play with some of the others, did not even make a dent in the defenses of both girls.

Laurie is still trying to impress upon the eldest, Ella, the lesson that the heart of the problem is that her sister will want whatever she is playing with. She has not yet gotten the picture that if she just lets her sister have it for a few minutes and plays with something else, it won’t be long before her sister abandons the former toy because now she must have whatever her big sister is playing with. Ella can let her have the new toy and go pick up the one that seemed so absolutely crucial just minutes earlier.

The incident made me think about what people really want. It occurred to me that adults look around and see what others have, and decide they want that too, that in fact they absolutely must have it. Children sometimes get fixated on a toy and believe life is hardly worth living if they can’t have that toy. It happens with adults. We get convinced that happiness lies in having something we see others having. This raises the question of what we really want and what will really bring us the life we want. That question comes into play in John 2:13-25.

JESUS CLEANED HOUSE

The incident recorded in this section of John’s book also shows up in Matthew’s, Mark’s and Luke’s accounts of Jesus’ life. The other three Gospels’ all have this happening in the last week of Jesus’ life, while John has it happening near the beginning of his ministry. This leaves us with 3 possibilities. The first is that this is a contradiction. This is one that critics seize upon and claim that the Gospel accounts are not reliable because of these kinds of contradictions. A second possible explanation is that Jesus actually did this twice, once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end. There are a number of differences in the accounts that some believe make this a real possibility. The third explanation is that there is a cultural difference at work in these accounts. The ancient writers did not have the same idea of chronology that we often do. They weren’t always trying to tell a story in strict chronological order. Often they might put incidents in the life of Jesus in a different order because it suited the message they were trying to get across. That was an accepted way of telling a story in their culture. That being the case it is unfair for someone today to accuse them of inaccuracy when they weren’t trying to do things the way we might.

When I was in grad school I had a class on missions. They discussed some of the challenges missionaries face when dealing with cultures that are very different than ours. I realized that I would not have made a very good missionary, for several reasons. One of them was that they made the point that many times the way a different culture did things weren’t wrong, they were just different. I would look at how they did things and think, “No, that’s just wrong.” Excuse me, but fried crickets is just not a delicacy one would ever want to eat. My point here is we must not judge ancient writers by our standards when they weren’t trying to do things the way we would do them.

Jesus went to Jerusalem and when he visited the temple he encountered people selling animals for sacrifices and others exchanging currency for the approved coinage for the temple tax that all Jewish men were required to pay each year, all inside the temple area. The Law required that any animal offered as a sacrifice be without flaws or blemishes. The obvious reason for this is that human nature would tend to look for the worst of the herd or floc and use that animal for the purpose of sacrifice. Toby and Anna have had 4 different dogs in their married life. One of them they eventually admitted was the worst dog ever. He was an Australian Shepherd they called Doc. His ears were supposed to fold over, but his just stood straight up. He had something called “cherry eye” where a part of one eye bulged out. And the dog was a mental case. He was so hyperactive he would make the energizer bunny look downright sluggish and lazy. He was the only dog that has ever bitten me. If a dog from their herd had to be sacrificed, the norm for humans would have been to pick him. In other words, human nature is to make the least sacrificial sacrifice possible. If we have to sacrifice one, let’s give up the defective one. God said that’s not how the deal should work. The animals had to be without flaw. God said worship was about giving the best, not the least costly.

The concern for people who came to the temple from outside Jerusalem was that they might bring an animal from their flock to sacrifice, but when they got there the priest might find something wrong with it and reject it. To avoid that, vendors set up shop right in the temple courts selling animals that had been pre-approved by the priests. This was a convenience for the people. They didn’t have to bring an animal with them and hope it would pass inspection. They could just go and buy a pre-approved animal at the temple. Of course, have you ever compared the cost of a bucket of popcorn at the movie theater with the price of popcorn you make at home? 50 cents worth of popcorn suddenly costs $9. Yes, but it comes with real movie butter. Right. You pay a premium for buying that popcorn at the theater, and that was also true of the animals at the temple.

There was also the matter of paying the temple tax. It had to be paid with a particular coin. That was because it was the only way the priests could be certain of the coin’s value. People would come from all over to the temple. They had to exchange whatever currency they had for the approved coin. There were people there who had an exchange business. They would take your local coin and, for a fee, give you the correct amount in the approved money. Once again, this was a convenience for the Jewish people.

None of this was new to Jesus. All of his life he had been coming to the temple every year, even as a young boy. He had seen these businesses in the temple area since as far back as he could remember. For the Jewish people of the first century it was as normal and expected as souvenir shops and concession stands at the stadium. No one gave it another thought. It was simply a routine part of life. If you went to see a movie would you be shocked to see that the theater was selling popcorn in the lobby? No, you’d be shocked if they weren’t. That’s how people in Jesus’ day say the businesses in the temple. To them there was nothing wrong with it. It was the norm. But it wasn’t how Jesus saw it.

It is not uncommon for people to think that Jesus flew off the handle in this incident. They think of him as angry, hitting people with a whip and violently chasing them out of the temple. That’s not quite accurate. He did make a whip, but he used it to drive the sheep and cattle out of the temple courts. He turned over the tables of the money changers. But he just said, “Get these out of here. Stop turning my Father’s house into a market.” He wasn’t ranting and raging, he wasn’t hitting anybody, he just told them to leave. He was intense and firm, to be sure, but he wasn’t flying of the handle in a rage.

Why was he so upset about this activity? He was bothered because they had turned the central place of worship, the heart and soul of his people, a place dedicated totally to honoring God, into a place to make money. The Greek word translated “market” was *emporiou*. We get our word emporium from it. I believe I have only been in one place called an emporium. When our kids were young we made a pilgrimage every year to Disneyland. Once a year we would make the trek to Anaheim to spend the day at the Happiest Place On Earth. We would get there as the park opened and stay until it was nearly closing. But every visit to Disneyland required a souvenir. They almost always came from one of two spots. One was the Star Trader in Tomorrowland. The other was a store on Main Street that we would go to on our way to the exit, along with what seemed like every other human being in Southern California. There we would try to wend our way through the masses as the kids perused the shirts, toys, dolls, trinkets that crammed the store trying to find that perfect souvenir. The store was called The Emporium, and it existed for one reason. It was there to charge exorbitant prices for those supposedly priceless articles of memorabilia, all of which have been long forgotten. Jesus’ problem with the situation was they had turned the worship of God into a business opportunity, a chance to make a few more shekels. The temple had become an emporium.

I suspect that part of Jesus’ issue with this situation is that the religious leaders of the nation were allowing this to go on in the temple and the businesses were taking advantage of the people who were there to worship. But the biggest problem was that people were using worship as an opportunity to make money. They were using God to enrich themselves. There was a significant problem with motives that were at best mixed. Making money became the higher priority.

There is an incident in Acts 8 that shares this problem. After the killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, persecution of the church began to escalate in Jerusalem, led by a man named Saul. Many Christians left Jerusalem to escape the persecution. A man named Philip went to a town in Samaria and began telling people about Jesus the Messiah. Large numbers of people put their faith in Jesus. The apostles sent Peter and John to find out about this remarkable movement because they weren’t sure about Samaritans becoming followers of Jesus. But the two apostles saw it was real, laid hands on the new believers and prayed for them and it was clear the Spirit of Jesus came on them.

There was a man named Simon in that city that was a sort of magician. He was famous in town. Verses 18-19 say, “When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, ‘Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’” Peter responded in verses 20-21, “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.” Simon was all about how he could promote his own business, and this giving the Holy Spirit thing would be a huge boost to it. His heart wasn’t right before God because it was focused on making money. That was a bit like what was happening at the temple in Jerusalem.

Back in John 2 verse 17 says, “His disciples remembered that it is written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’” That’s a citation from Psalm 69:9. The disciples saw that Jesus had a heart that beat for the worship of his Father. That was what was being compromised at the temple, and Jesus did the radical thing of clearing the businesses out to put a spotlight on the problem.

JESUS CONFUSED SOME PEOPLE

Jesus really rattled cages when he pulled this stunt. I don’t know this for a fact, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the religious leaders got at least a cut of the profits of these businesses. What we do know is that this action made the religious leaders look bad and it hit some influential people in the place it hurts most, right in the wallet. On top of that, no one else in the nation saw anything wrong with the status quo. Hey, what’s the big deal? These businesses are just in the temple to help people out, right?

When you attack the status quo, especially if money is involved, you should not be surprised if you provoke a reaction. Jesus certainly did. In verse 18 John tells us the Jews, meaning the Jewish religious leaders, said to Jesus, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” In other words, who gave you the right to kick these people out of the temple? Since when are you in charge of the temple?

They insisted he’d better show them some kind of sign that he had the right to do this. In the classic musical *The Music Man*, when the con man posing as professor Harold Hill comes to River City, Iowa and upsets the whole town with his talk of trouble in River City evidenced by the presence of a pool hall in town and of a new boys band that would solve the problem, at one point the city council members come to him and say, “Just a minute, Professor. We need your credentials.” That’s what the leaders were saying to Jesus. They were insisting he’d better perform some sign that proves he has divine authority.

Jesus’ answer was, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” That didn’t help at all. It totally confused people. The temple in Jerusalem at that time was started by Herod, who was mostly despised by Jews. He thought he could raise his PR image by building a magnificent temple. The building project had gone on for 46 years at that point, and wouldn’t finally be completed for more than 30 years. After such a long construction effort it was tragic that it would be utterly destroyed by the Romans only 6 years after it was finished, never to be rebuilt.

The religious leaders were incredulous. Such a massive building that it has taken 46 years to build it, and you claim you can rebuild it in 3 days? That’s totally absurd. It’s impossible. Plus, that’s no sign at all because how are we supposed to test that? We’re not going to destroy the temple. No one wants to destroy the temple, so this is a completely empty boast. It would be a bit like me saying, “To show you how generous I am, if someone gave me a billion dollars, I’d give all but a million away to charitable causes.” How would you ever know that’s true, since no one is going to give me a billion dollars? That is a completely empty claim.

John reveals that Jesus was actually talking about something different, something radical. He said the temple he was referring to was not the building in Jerusalem, but it was his own body. This was a remarkable statement. First, it was revolutionary because he was saying that there was going to be a new temple, a new place where people could meet God and worship him. It wasn’t a building, it was actually Jesus himself. He was claiming that there would no longer be a need for a specific physical building in a particular location where people could go to worship God. All of that would be replaced by Jesus himself. Now, Jesus claimed, people would meet God and worship him through Jesus.

The second reason this statement was remarkable was because it was actually a prophecy. Jesus was saying that the religious leaders were going to destroy his body. Luke 19:47 says after this incident, “the chief priests, the teachers of the Law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him.” Jesus was prophesying his execution, but also his resurrection. The third day he would, “rebuild the temple,” meaning raise it back up.

This raises the question, why would Jesus say this, knowing that there was no way anyone could understand what he meant? Even his followers couldn’t get it at that point. His opponents certainly would give it the worst possible interpretation and would use it against him. Matthew 26:61 says that during Jesus trial before the religious court of Israel two witnesses said about him, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” They misquoted Jesus, but that is evidence that this statement was another log they threw on the fire in their effort to destroy Jesus. So why did he say this when it had no chance of being understood?

I think one small part of the reason was that Jesus was a master at communication. On a number of occasions he said things that were almost incendiary and either hard or impossible to understand. He did it to capture people’s attention and to challenge their thinking. It made them think that this guy maybe knew something they didn’t know. That’s part of it. But the bigger part is that Jesus was teaching his own disciples. They didn’t understand what he meant at the time, but later on they got it. When they did get it they thought, “Oh, wow, he knew even before it happened that he was going to be killed and would rise from the dead. It was in his plan all along.” Even when they didn’t get it immediately Jesus was teaching them and strengthening their faith.

IMPLICATIONS

That’s all well and good, but does this have any relevance for us? It helps us have even more admiration for Jesus. He showed great courage and conviction. But it has some other relevance for us as well.

GOD DOESN’T SHARE WORSHIP

Jesus is the model for life. In this incident we are told that zeal for his Father’s house consumed him. When I consume one of my favorite doughnuts, I eat the whole thing. It’s all gone, nothing is left. Zeal, passion for the glory of his Father, consumed Jesus. It ate him up, all of him. We can see that in John 4:34. Jesus had stopped near a Samaritan town. While his guys went into town to get some sandwiches for lunch, Jesus struck up a conversation with a woman with a sketchy reputation. The guys were surprised, but offered him a sandwich, but he said, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” They were puzzled, wondering who gave him food. There wasn’t a Taco Bell within miles of the place. Then he said in verse 34, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” What drove Jesus, what fueled him, was doing his Father’s will, honoring and serving him. That was what his entire life was about.

This is what God wants for all of us. He desires that our food also be doing his will. Exodus 20:3 tells us that the first of the Ten Commandments was, “You shall have no other gods before me.” No other phony god should take first place in our hearts and lives. That spot, the one that rules over everything, is reserved for the one true God. Jesus would say in Matthew 22:37 that the greatest commandment, the most important thing to do in life is, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is not about parsing what it means to love with our heart or loving with our mind, it is about loving God with every bit of everything that is in us.

The problem at the temple was that the god of making money had elbowed its way into Israel’s worship. Sure, we worship God, but we want to make money too. The problem with that is that any time something competes with God, it is actually taking precedence over him. We make room for it because we want it more than we want to love and worship God.

Throughout the history of God’s people, including to this very day, they have had a tendency to want to love God with *some* of their heart, soul and mind. But we have other things we want to pursue, too, and those things compete with God. There has been a long history of God’s people sort of worshiping him, going through the motions, but not actually loving and worshiping him with all their being.

In Isaiah 1:11-14 God says to Israel, “The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me, says the Lord. I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations, I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.” These sacrifices, feasts and rituals were commanded by God, but he said they were all detestable to him. He hated them. Imagine if God said that about us. Your worship services make me sick. I hate them. Yikes. Why would he say that? It was because of what Isaiah 29:13 says. “The Lord says, ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’”

Yes, they were doing the commanded things, but their hearts were not in worshiping God. Their hearts were somewhere else. In Haggai 1 the people of Israel had gone back to their homeland after living in exile in Babylon for many years. Unfortunately, their homeland was definitely in the category of a fixer upper at that point. It had been devastated by a ruinous war, then left derelict for decades. They had to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and Nehemiah tells us about that. But as a first order of business they needed to build a new temple so they could worship God. How did that go? Haggai 1:2-4 says, “This is what the Lord Almighty says, ‘These people say, The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’ Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: ‘Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’”

There was a visible expression of the problem. They had been able to build themselves nice, comfortable, stylish homes. But somehow they hadn’t gotten around to building the temple. What mattered to them? They could say God was the Lord of their lives, but their actions said otherwise. Taking care of themselves came first. In verse 9 God said, “My house remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.” This incident from Jesus’ life reminds that God wants our hearts, like that of Jesus, to be consumed with passion for him, for loving, serving and worshiping him. That passion should rule everything else. It is to be the driving and controlling force in everything we are and do.

In Acts 13:22 Paul said, “After removing Saul he (God) made David their king. God testified concerning him, ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’” David was a man after God’s own heart because he wanted more than anything to know, love, serve and worship God. That is what he wants from us as well.

Over the years I’ve heard people object to that idea, saying such a God would be obsessed with himself, needing everyone to love and worship him. They say they can’t respect that. Isn’t it interesting that they would object to God desiring the same thing they desire? Years ago there was a family that lived up the street from us that sold their house and moved away because the couple got divorced. They got divorced because the wife had an affair with a man not her husband. Her husband was not willing to share her with someone else, and so they got divorced. Do you think anyone blamed him for not being willing to share her love and affection with another man? Absolutely not. He should not accept that. We understand that. If that’s right for a man, why is it so hard to understand for the God in whose image that man is created?

Here’s the problem with us not putting God first in our hearts in everything in life. We ultimately can worship above all else only one thing. Whatever else we want to worship will ultimately boil down to something we want. In other words, it comes down to ourselves. We will either love and worship God with all our heart, or we will worship self. And worshiping self is the source of all the evil that has ever happened in the human race. The unfortunate reality is to the degree that we don’t love and worship God with all our heart, we are somehow creating and doing evil.

In his book, *Loving Christ*, Joe Stowell told about a conversation he had with a young woman who was in a serious relationship with a guy she seemed crazy about. He asked her what it was she liked about this boyfriend. She didn’t talk about his charming personality, his good looks, his ambition, his intelligence. She said, “He adores me.” Stowell said that’s what God wants from us. “He wants to know where he stands among all the stuff of our lives. Is he the compelling priority, or just one thing among the many things that get a little attention here and a little attention there?”

GOD LOVES FLAWED PEOPLE

It would be great if we all loved God the way we should, but we don’t. This kind of message can be a real guilt producer because we all know that we fall short. We all get distracted by other desires and ends, and we are all very much concerned about ourselves and our lives right now. Those concerns often eclipse our love for God. Like the ancient people of Israel, we are busy with our own houses while his is in ruins.

Given that, it would be easy to feel inadequate. The problem with feeling inadequate, with always knowing you fall short and despite your best efforts you think you’ll never be what you should, is that makes us feel like giving up. There was a point in my life when I thought maybe I should try to actually make an effort to become not horrible at golf. I know a lot of people love the game and I realized it was a game I could play into my old age, which was not true of hockey and baseball. Honestly, I didn’t make that big of an effort at it. But I did go out to a driving range to work on it. The results were not encouraging. Golf should be easy. I played a lot of baseball, where you have to hit a moving ball with a round bat and have precious little time to do it. In golf there is a little ball just sitting there, not moving and you hit it with a club with a flat face. And you have as much time to do it as you think you need. How hard is that? It’s simple. At least it should be. But I found myself frustrated with how poorly I hit the ball. Especially the driver. Every time I hit a solid shot with a driver, the ball would rocket off the tee. It felt good, it looked like it was going to be great, then the ball would suddenly make a violent right turn like there was some kind of powerful magnet inexorably drawing that ball toward it. I knew why that happened. I was hitting the ball with the face of the club slanted, thus putting spin on the ball. I tried all kinds of things to fix that and never could.

It didn’t take long before I faced the fact that I was terrible, and that even if I improved, my ceiling was maybe I could be a little less terrible. Do I really want to invest time, energy and money into a game that at best I will be wretched at? I got discouraged both by my inability and by the realization that my ceiling was so low. I gave up on golf. I haven’t played the game in 20 years.

Our problem is that when it comes to loving God, if we are consistently bad at it and we realize that we have a low ceiling, we’re going to give up. What we’ll do is what religious people have done throughout the centuries. Do what is necessary to make it look like we’re trying, kind of do the minimum, but in reality turn our attention to other more hopeful endeavors. We may do religious actions, but our heart will be somewhere else.

It is crucial that we think about Jesus’ “tear down this temple and I will rebuild it in 3 days” comment. He was referring to his death and resurrection. That was the focal point of his life. It was his “hour” as he mentioned earlier in the chapter. It was the great work that has made it possible for us to be accepted and loved by God. If we think the path to life is just trying harder, well, we’re going to be hitting a lot of bad slices. We won’t get there. The solution for us is remember that this is why Jesus let them tear down the temple of his body. It is why he came and why he died. Because of that, we are free, we are loved. Rather than trying to love God better and more purely in order to get him to accept us, an effort doomed to failure, we try to love him because he is worthy of it, because we are so grateful for what he has done for us, and because it is the path to life and joy.

CONCLUSION

How can we increase our love for God? There are two aspects to that.

**Believe he is the path to joy and life**

In Psalm 16:11 David wrote, “You make known to me the path of life; you fill me with joy in your presence.” We are inherently self oriented people. We are most motivated when we see the return we get from something. When we believe in our hearts that the path to the best possible life is knowing and loving God, we will pursue that most of all. If we believe something else is the key to that life, we will pursue that and God will take a back seat.

God does not guarantee us an easy life, a comfortable life. But he does guarantee the best, most full life comes through him. The more we believe that, the more we will love him.

**Choose to love him**

Love has two components. There is an emotional component. Real love has some passion. Then there is a volitional component. There is a choice to commit. For love to be real and full it must have both of these aspects.

I see this in my relationship with Laurie. A month before we got engaged Laurie told me she loved me. I had already told her I loved her. She had told me she loved me too, but then she had said she took it back, that she didn’t. But that day, Valentine’s Day, 1979, she said she loved me and would never take it back. She had that emotional component. That was important. Had she committed to marry me but there was no passion , no emotion in it, would that have made me happy? Dutiful commitment would feel empty. I want much more than that.

So her declaration of love, her emotion was huge. But she also said she didn’t want me to ask her to make any commitments. That left us in an odd state. I knew she loved me, but she wasn’t ready to make a commitment to me. It was nice to know she had the emotional part, but it wasn’t enough. Exactly one month later she decided what she wanted most in life was to spend it with me, and she committed to do that.

For us to love God we need the passion. That comes from knowing how awesome he is, how much he loves us, from knowing what he has done for us and the life and joy come through him. It comes from knowing he is the path to life and joy. But then we need to choose every day to have him first in everything in our hearts. Sometimes that’s a choice of pure will, but it is a choice we need to continue to make.

We all know something about this. I was scheduled to have my first immune therapy infusion 10 days ago. For me this was an unknown and an intimidating prospect. The infusions themselves actually only take an hour, but the whole Choosing to have Laurie go help Carissa when she was sick rather than come with me for my first infusion. That wasn’t an emotional choice. It was a decision of the will because we love our kids and grandkids. Sometimes we make choices that are decisions of the will. The same is true of loving and worshiping God.