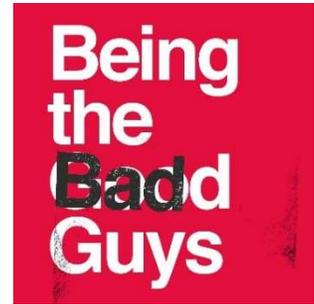


Week 4: Self-Denial vs. Self-Actualization

NCAC Adult Sunday School

October 10, 2021



Key Resource: *Being the Bad Guys: How to live for Jesus in a World That Says You Shouldn't* by Stephen McAlpine (The Good Book Company, 2021)

WHAT WE'VE COVERED SO FAR:

- Over the past several decades Christianity has moved from being generally seen as a force for good to being something that was tolerated to being seen as wrong and even dangerous.
- Today the world celebrates a new religion built on commitment to individual autonomy and celebration of personal authenticity at any cost. Ultimate meaning is now found in the self.
- A core component of this new religion is gender identity, which is determined by each individual based on their feelings. The Bible's view of gender is seen as restraining and oppressive.
- With cultural values shifting and popular assumptions changing, many believers feel as though we are now the victims of a concerted campaign to marginalize and silence Christians.
- Others believe the Church has long abused its power by covering up scandals, repressing the marginalized, and demeaning non-Christians. They say Christians are now getting what is due.
- While there may be some truth in both narratives, Christians need to be careful about taking on a victim mentality. Christ calls us to love and pray for all others—even those who persecute us.

A FEW CLARIFICATIONS ON LAST WEEK'S LESSON:

First, acknowledging our new position on the margins of our culture and committing ourselves to treat those who oppose biblical values with love and grace does not mean we should just embrace a defeatist attitude, roll over and keep quiet. On the contrary, Christians must find ways to give voice to truth; but as we promote Christian values, we must do so in a way that *reflects* Christian values:

*“Christians feeling heat from the Cancel Culture may feel a pull toward one of two extremes: the wrath of man or the fear of man. ‘The wrath of man,’ James warned ‘does not produce the righteousness of God.’ (James 1:20). Wrath doesn’t want to correct a wrong-doing. It only wants to punish the wrongdoer...But the fear of man is no better...Believers who let cultural intimidation keep them silent wind up ensnared by their own fears, afraid of offending man more than God, keeping peace at the cost of integrity. Jesus modeled a better way. He was neither a timid, squeaking mouse who scurried from confrontation, nor a raving loudmouth who built a following with insults and sarcasm. He was as John said, full of grace and truth (John 1:4).” (Joe Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, Harvest House, 2021)*

Second, admitting that Christians have not always treated others in God-honoring ways does not require us to take on a posture of guilt-by-association or to view ourselves as oppressors. It simply acknowledges that evils have been done by those who claim to follow Christ, which will hopefully help open the door to explain and demonstrate what it truly means to follow Christ:

“France has been rocked by the news that over 300,000 children were abused by clergy and lay people in the Catholic Church over a 70-year period. While acknowledging the horror of this news, we might be tempted to comfort ourselves by saying that it doesn’t affect us because we are neither French nor Catholic. Sadly, however, that won’t wash. Firstly, there have been examples of abuse much closer to home over the years, so this can’t be dismissed as being something that only happens somewhere else.

“Secondly, most members of the public when looking at this incident won’t make a distinction between churches in one country or another, or between different streams of the church, they will just see it as proof that church leaders abuse children. Increasingly, a narrative is gaining ground that children are not safe at church and this latest case will reinforce this. Mud sticks and we are all touched by it.” (Eddie Arthur, “Are We the Baddies?” October 5, 2021)

Third, we need to be aware that in recent years there’s been a deepening of divisions among American evangelicals, not so much over theology but over how Christians should engage our culture. This has likely been accelerated by social media, political polarizations, and increasing tensions related to race and gender—all combined with pandemic stress. We must resist getting caught up in these divisions.

“New fractures are forming within the American evangelical movement, fractures that do not run along the usual regional, denominational, ethnic, or political lines. Couples, families, friends, and congregations once united in their commitment to Christ are now dividing over seemingly irreconcilable views of the world. In fact, they are not merely dividing but becoming incomprehensible to one another.” (Timothy Dalrymple, “The Splintering of the Evangelical Soul,” Christianity Today, April 16, 2021)

Any comments on the above, or any other questions?

SELF-DENIAL VS. SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Today’s Class Goals: *Self-Denial vs. Self-Actualization*

- What does the world teach about self-actualization and being our true self?
- What does the Bible teach about self-denial and finding our true self?
- How can we foster and encourage true authenticity?

What do people mean when they say you should “be yourself” or “be who you are”?

What's good about "being yourself"?

What's often missed when people say you should just "be yourself"?

WHAT DOES THE WORLD TEACH ABOUT SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND BEING OUR TRUE SELF?

Though self-actualization has been defined many different ways, according to Maslow, it involves "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming."

In his book, McAlpine observes how the secular media affirmed and celebrated Phillip Schofield, a particular television personality, for publically coming out as gay, despite the fact that Schofield admitted his coming out had caused hurt to his family and would likely lead to the end of his marriage.

Responses from others to Schofield's coming out included statements such as "I am sending all my love to Phillip Schofield today. I have always held him in the highest regard, and now have nothing but respect and admiration for him." Another praised Schofield for his "bravery." Said another, "So proud of you and your family, Philip. Welcome to your true and authentic self."

"As this narrative goes, [Schofield's] life up to this point was therefore less than authentic. His wedding vows, his marriage, the heterosexual family man: this other Phillip Schofield was the inauthentic version, untrue to himself, and in the process, untrue to the long line of those who have shown their own authenticity by coming out. He was late to be brave and 'do the right thing,' but he has now put this right." (Bad Guys, p. 78)

What are some other examples of ways our culture promotes the idea of "being true to yourself" or "following your own heart"?

Why do you think this call to be your "true self" has entranced so many in our culture?

Are there ways in which our Christian culture has bought into the world's idea of self-fulfillment and authenticity?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SELF-DENIAL AND FINDING OUR TRUE SELF?

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:24-26, ESV)

What challenge does Jesus present to His followers?

When it comes specifically to issues of sex and gender, what might it look like to “deny yourself”?

How does Jesus promise true fulfillment to those who deny themselves and follow Him?

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:17-24, ESV)

What does Paul say about where we should not look to find our true self—and why?

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you... (Colossians 3:1-5a, ESV)

What does Paul say about where we should look to find our true self—and why?

HOW CAN WE FOSTER AND ENCOURAGE TRUE AUTHENTICITY?

What does Christ offer that the world is so desperately seeking?

As we engage with a world that encourages everyone to be their true self regardless of what else that might mean, how can we show them God's way is better?

First, we need to be careful that we don't buy into the world's narrative:

"If we haven't pumped self-denial iron in 'spiritual' matters, then we won't in sexual matters. If our reflex has become self-fulfillment, we'll employ therapeutic language instead of more challenging biblical descriptions. We will label as 'brave', 'being true to yourself' and 'leaving bigotry behind' what the Bible calls 'falling away' (Hebrews 3 v 12, ESV) or being 'in love with this present age' (2 Timothy 4 v 10, ESV)." (Bad Guys, p. 84)

Second, we should look for ways to practice *genuine* self-denial for the good of others:

"Christians can also mask their self-promotion as self-denial. We proudly Instagram the number of reps in our Crossfit session, or put the 35km run we did on Strava, or publicize the hours of study we put in to achieve the grades that would get us into the course we wanted at university.

"Yet the test comes if we are asked to give up Crossfit because our prayer life has fallen away; or if we are injured when running and have to do rehab for six months and still be godly in our attitudes; or if we are asked to meet one-on-one with a new Christian and risk missing [getting a lower exam score]. Is our self-denial actual self-denial or merely a deliberately conspicuous veneer, designed—whether we admit it to ourselves or not—to mask selfishness?" (Bad Guys, pp. 86-87)

Third, we must be ready to point people to Christ when disillusionment sets in:

"Part of the reason we experience hostility when we offer self-denial as the path to life is precisely because the cracks are there. They are busily being papered over by those who have no interest in us pointing them out. This is not to say that the self-fulfillment authenticity narrative is an unmitigated disaster...But if we take Jesus at his word, the ultimate conclusion is death. And if the destination is death, then there will be hints along the way that that is the endpoint." (Bad Guys, p. 89)

What else might you add to this list?