



Respectable Sins: Selfishness

Fr. William Klock
July 6, 2008 – Trinity 7

What do we make of the fact that so many of the great men and women of the faith have had their faults? That so many of them have obvious feet of clay? When I was little someone gave me a child's storybook about Martin Luther. I admired and looked up to him as a kid. When I was older I picked up a biography of him written for young adults and admired him even more. When I was in high school I started reading his sermons and he profoundly influenced my faith. And then when I was in college studying church history I read the histories and biographies for grown-ups that didn't whitewash history and characters the way kid's storybooks do. I learned that Luther, my great hero of the faith was temperamental and would often get enraged or would storm away from an argument in an enormous huff. In one instance, he and John Calvin were discussing the nature of Jesus' presence in the Lord's Supper. Calvin said that Jesus was spiritually present and Luther insisted he was physically and bodily present. In the end Luther angrily scrawled the word "is" (as in "this *is* my body") on the tablecloth and stormed away. That was the end of his talks with Calvin.

When I studied United States history I fell in love with the character of General Robert E. Lee. To this day he's still my favourite character in American history. He was a true Christian gentleman and a man of deep and profound faith that truly influenced the way in which he lived his life. And yet he was a slave owner despite his own personal reservations against the institution of slavery.

What do we make of knowing that great men and women of the faith so often have feet of clay? Well, it ought to be a warning to us that despite our best efforts to uphold God's truth and to live according to God's precepts, we all have blind spots – we all fail to fully live the fruit of the Spirit. We can be orthodox in our theology and circumspect in our morality and yet still tolerate "subtle" and

"acceptable" sins in our lives – sins like the ones I've been addressing for the last two months.

Did Luther deliberately try to be angry and prideful. No, I don't think so. The fact is that God created Luther as he was and gave him the ability to stand firm for truth in the face of persecution. Luther was the right man to stand before the papal prelates and the Emperor at Worms. But just as much as we may use God's gifts for his service, we can also abuse them. Every personality trait can be used for God or can be abused and used wrongly for selfish gratification. We need to take our God-given personality traits captive to Christ and put them to use in his service.

Selfishness can be one of our big blind spots – one of our tolerated "acceptable" sins. It's something we inherited from our first sinful parents as part of our sin nature. Think about it. How many of you here had to teach your kids to be selfish? No, they come out of the womb selfish little savages with no thought for anyone but themselves! A baby has no capability of self-control at the start and when they don't get what they want they scream themselves into a fury. Look at little kids. A brother and a sister were sitting on a rocking horse. The boy said to his sister, "You know, it sure is crowded here. If one of us would get off, there'd be a lot more room for me!" How many of us had to teach our kids not to share with their friends or their brothers and sisters? No, you have to teach them *to* share!

As we get older we learn that obvious acts of selfishness are socially unacceptable and so we find more subtle ways to be selfish – but the problem is still there. Even as Christians we still struggle with the flesh that wars against the Spirit. And one of the manifestations of the flesh is selfishness.

This is a hard sin to expose. It's easy to see it in other people, but not always easy to see in ourselves. Part of the problem in seeing it is that there are different degrees of selfishness. Some people may be blatantly and openly selfish. Someone may steal things from other people or just make it plain by the way he treats them that he doesn't care about them at all. I don't think that's a problem that most of us are struggling with. Our selfishness is usually more subtle and more refined.

Are we selfish with our *interests*? Look at what St. Paul wrote to the Philippians in 2:4:

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

By interests Paul meant not only the needs and concerns of other people, but also in a narrower sense, the things they're interested in.

Think about what interests you. When you get together with other people do you talk only about your interests or do the other people there talk about theirs too? I know a person that only talks on two subjects: herself and her kids and grandkids. If she stops talking about them long enough for you talk about something that interests you, she'll quickly grab hold of what you just said and turn it around to point back at herself or her kids again. If your kids did something great and you bring it up, her kids have always done the same thing first or done it better than yours.

I do it too. Veronica can tell you how many times I've come home from work and immediately started in on the, "You would not believe what I had to deal with today..." litany – not thinking to stop and ask her first how her day went and what she did. I know I've probably bored friends and family to tears talking about the things that interest me – probably theology, ecclesiology, or genealogy!

We need to evaluate how we interact with others in this respect. A good test of the degree of selfishness in our interests would be to reflect on the conversation and ask yourself just how much time you spent talking about yourself compared to letting others talk about themselves and what interests them. Someone once pointed out to me, "If everyone else's plate is empty and yours is still full, its time to start using your mouth for eating instead of talking." Anyone who knows me also knows that I'm still learning to put that into practice.

Now you might say, "Well, what you're talking about might be rude or unthoughtful, but it's not *sin*." But the fact is that it's a big indicator of our self-centredness. It shows that we're mostly concerned about ourselves. In 2 Timothy 3:1-5, St. Paul gives us a list of some pretty ugly sins that will characterise the

“last days.” The first sin in that list is “lovers of self.” That’s a good description of a selfish person, because he’s first and foremost centred on himself. If he takes it to an extreme, he simply doesn’t care about others or their interests, their needs, or their desires. His only interest is himself, and his self-centred conversation is the evidence.

How about this: are you selfish with your *time*? Time is a precious commodity that we only have a limited amount of. You can become wealthy and have extra money to spend, but not many folks have “extra” time. We’re all busy and it’s easy to become selfish with our time. A husband who says to his wife, “My time is more important than yours,” is being obviously selfish, but we can be more subtly selfish here too.

No matter who we are, we tend to guard our time. Think of a student asking her roommate to help her with homework, but the roommate is busy studying for a final exam. Will she give up her precious time to help with the homework, or will she keep it for herself? Or will she give of her time to help, but do it grudgingly? For that matter, is the first student acting selfishly to ask her roommate for help when she knows she’s busy studying for the big test the next morning?

We can be selfish by inordinately guarding our time, but we can also be selfish when we unduly impose on someone else’s time. Either way, we’re thinking of ourselves and not the other person.

Think about this in the context of your home-life. Husbands, wives, and kids all have things they have to do, and much of the time we’re reluctant to step outside our own duties. We take a “that’s not my job” attitude. Kids are known for actually saying, “Hey, that’s not my job!” But even as adults we do the same thing – we’re just more subtle about it. Rather than saying, “I’ll take care of that for you,” we just ignore the help another person needs and go about our own thing. And yet St. Paul tells us to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Going beyond our normal duties to help someone is one way we can bear each other’s burdens.

A third area in which we can be selfish is our *money*. I don’t know what the statistics are in Canada, but Americans give less than two percent of their income to charities or religious causes. The United States is the richest nation in the world with the highest standard of living and yet Americans give only two percent of their money away – and that’s the most of any nation in the world. I don’t know how far behind that number Canada falls, but it does mean we here give less than two percent too.

We pride ourselves on our generosity when there’s a major natural disaster, but the statistics don’t lie. They show that on the whole we’re indifferent to the physical and material needs of people worse off than ourselves.

This is especially important for Christians. St. Peter wrote that we are to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). St. John wrote, “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 John 3:17). The Gospel calls us to cultivate hearts of compassion toward those in need and then put that compassion to work through our giving.

But what about giving to the Church? Less than four percent of North American Christians tithe. That’s the minimum standard for giving that Scripture sets for us, and yet 96% of us don’t meet that God-given standard. We’d rather keep our money for ourselves. But what does that say about our appreciation for what God has blessed us with? He calls us to trust him and to rely on him for our needs – “seek first his Kingdom and all these things shall be added unto you” – and promises that he will take care of us even better than the most loving parent. And he not only meets our most basic needs, he’s blessed us with an abundance from which he only asks for ten percent back. That ten percent is really a token amount that acknowledges that it came from him to begin with and that we trust him for our provision. And we treat our money as if we’re ultimately responsible for having received every last penny.

Finally, what about *inconsiderateness*? Being inconsiderate can express itself in quite a few ways, but the bottom line is that the inconsiderate person simply

doesn’t think about the impact of his actions on other people. The person who’s always late and keeps everyone waiting is inconsiderate. The person who talks loudly on his cell phone to the disturbance of others is selfishly inconsiderate. The teenager (or the husband) who leaves his mess on the kitchen counter for mom to clean-up is inconsiderate. Any time we fail to think about the impact of our actions on someone else, we are being selfishly inconsiderate. We are thinking only of ourselves.

We can also be inconsiderate of the feelings of others. Think about how often you’ve been rude or even downright mean to a waitress, a clerk at the store, to a customer service rep on the telephone when you’ve been on hold for half-an-hour, or to the anonymous person at the other end of an internet connection. Maybe we’re not mean or nasty, but we’re inconsiderate of their feelings. Instead of being rude or indifferent, we can with no more expenditure of energy brighten someone’s day with a simple thank you and a little graciousness. Think about the witness you have to people like that, who are used to taking the brunt of others’ frustration all day long. You may have all the reason in the world to be angry or upset, but sharing God’s grace by being thoughtful is one means by which we share Christ with the world.

The person whose attitude is, “I just say what I think and let the chips fall where they may,” is selfishly inconsiderate. He’s indifferent to the possibility of embarrassment, humiliation, and hurt feelings. He may call it honesty, but in the end he’s only concerned with expressing his own thoughts and opinions.

Scripture calls us to look not only to our own interests, but to the interests of others. If we broaden what that means to include the needs and concerns of others, as I think St. Paul did, then you can see that the unselfish person not only is indifferent to the needs of others, but actually expects them to meet his needs and desires. This is the sort of thing that kills a marriage: when the husband and wife get married to have their own needs met, rather than to serve and meet the needs of their spouse.

Certainly the greatest example we have of unselfishness is Jesus Christ. As St. Paul says, though he was rich, for our sake he became poor so that by his poverty we could become rich (see 2 Corinthians 8:9). Paul urges us, as Christ's followers, to cultivate that same frame of mind (Philippians 2:5).

Think of the many priests that died of plague in the Fourteenth Century. The bubonic plague wiped out 30 to 40 percent of Europe's population because it was so contagious and so deadly. People were afraid. If a member of their family became sick, they would often leave that person to die rather than risk staying in the house with them and getting sick themselves. Many of the priests of the day stepped in to serve those who were dying and many of them in turn caught the plague and died themselves. It's said that the best of the priests were killed by the plague, leaving the worst of the priests to live.

In our cases, it's unlikely that living unselfishly will result in our deaths, but it can be costly. It means giving up our time, our money, and our interests and investing in the interests and concerns of others.

I suggest that the place to start is in our own homes and with our own families. Most of us tend to be on our best behaviour when we're outside the home, but when we get home we tend to set aside our artificial restraints and truly be ourselves – to live out our true character. And because selfishness is something that's often so hard to see in ourselves, we ought to start by asking our family members to point out our selfish tendencies. We should do this without being defensive. We shouldn't retaliate by then bringing up the selfishness we see in that other person. Instead, we ought to humbly and genuinely repent, and start praying that the Holy Spirit will enable us to deal with those selfish characteristics. God fills every one of us with his Spirit for a reason – to open our eyes to sin in our lives and to help us to overcome that sin. This is an area where we need to ask the Spirit to make us "extra" sensitive, and then we need to seek his help set that sin aside.

Please pray with me: Father, we come to you knowing that selfishness is one of our

big problems. We engage in it so often that we're often completely blind to it. Open our eyes to any place where this sin exists in our lives and give us the grace to overcome it, replacing it with a selfless love for others. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

(This series of sermons is adapted from Jerry Bridges book, "Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate", NavPress, 2007.)