

THINKING BEYOND OURSELVES

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Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.... Let each of you look not to your own interests alone, but to the interests of others as well. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.... — Philippians 2:4-5

I

There is a rule by which human helpfulness happens—it is the rule of thinking of more than oneself. Booker T. Washington, the noted black American who gained honor as a social leader and educator during the post-Reconstruction period, mentioned in his autobiography how his life had been filled with many great and encouraging surprises. As he told it, many of those surprises were due to his effort “to make each day reach as nearly as possible the high-water mark of pure, unselfish, useful living.”¹ He went on to comment that he pitied any person who had never experienced the joy and satisfaction that comes from assisting someone else. He made these comments in a section written to honor those who had assisted him in securing what was necessary to create, develop and support Tuskegee Institute, the now-famous university he founded and guided until his untimely death. Washington was grateful to the many benefactors, advisors, and encouragers who had looked and thought beyond themselves to help him and those for whom he did his thinking and major work.

Booker T. Washington understood—and from the inside of many predicaments—that nothing of creative benefit to the world has ever been accomplished when humans isolate themselves in selfish planning. The will to care, the will to share, the motivation to think of more than oneself, is the first step toward human benefit and the shaping of a helpful community life.

The Apostle Paul understood and advocated this—and the reports we have

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about his life and work well illustrate that he lived by such a rule. Thus our text, a reminding word to a congregation whose unselfish caring toward him blessed his memory as he wrote to them from his prison cell. The believers at Philippi had sent him some gifts by the hands of Epaphroditus, and along with the gifts came news of their continued progress in the things of the Lord. Their continued progress encouraged him, and he said so: "...this is evidence of...your salvation. And this is God's doing" (Phil. 1:28). Our text was part of Paul's encouragement to them to "keep on keeping on." He expected to be released soon, and to rejoin them in due time, but he knew that the congregation could endure and remain a vital people even in his continued absence if they remained true to the rules for progress in helpfulness. Thus his reminding word about unselfish caring: "Let each of you look not to your own interests [alone], but to the interests of others [as well]."

II

This is the central rule by which Christian experience and church life go forward. Actually, this rule explains the motivation by which that congregation came into being under Paul's preaching and guidance. Interestingly, however, when the Apostle thought to illustrate the rule he chose not to call attention to himself as one practitioner or example of it; passing up the opportunity to mention himself, he pointed rather quickly in the succeeding verses to the highest example of unselfish caring by reminding the congregation about how Jesus Christ thought beyond himself and became the suffering servant God used to bring deliverance within reach to an entire fallen human race:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:6-11).

Verses 6-11 are an illustration, then, of unselfish caring. But what a supreme, instructive, humbling illustration! What a mind-boggling illustration! For here, in a fresh form, in a lyrical hymn, Paul has restated the Gospel, the Christ-Event. No reference is made here to any proclamation by Jesus, but consider what a direct and mind-engaging statement is made here about him. This is a short but provocatively substantive statement. Nothing is said about the circumstance of his birth, and yet the motivation for that birth is crystal clear, for his purpose was to take on our "human likeness," indeed, our "human form," this situated condition within which death was inevitable, so that his assumed "eligibility" to die could be used to the highest purpose, namely to save us by offering up himself to God on a cross. The Incarnation is in full view here! It is declared, not explained. It is accepted, not analyzed! It is reported, not explored! Here,

in this mind-engaging *kenosis* report we have what I view as a substantive counterpart to the synoptic presentation of Jesus as Son of man. Here we have a Pauline statement about the pre-existent Son, who became the historical Jesus, who is now the kerygmatic Christ. Here we have a reminding statement about the Suffering Servant who dares to die, who becomes the Exalted Savior through the resurrection event. Here we have the highest illustration of unselfish caring, the willingness to think beyond oneself in the interest of benefiting others. Here, in a two-part movement, is a hymn about Christ—his incarnation as Son (what was involved, why it happened), and his resultant exaltation (why it happened, and what will follow from it in due time). Given the import of this passage, there is sound reason to imitate his example. Given the present meaning and the manifest future of our faith, there is also incentive here to imitate our Lord. I like the way John Watson, the noted English preacher, put it: "Altruism is written in everlasting and resplendent character on the Cross of Christ, and it was at Calvary that the centre of life was shifted from selfishness to sacrifice."² No wonder Paul shrank back from using his own limited life as an example of unselfish caring! Paul knew his limits and wisely stayed within them.

III

Uncaring caring, thinking beyond one's own affairs to give time and attention to others: that is the pressing need among us, that is the rule for human progress. The happening only awaits an opening in us. Opening ourselves in this way is something of which we are capable, and remembering how others gave themselves to bless us in our need can stir us to open ourselves readily and without fear.

Paul modeled what he saw in the life and spirit of Jesus. That is what he advised the believers at Philippi to continue doing. He knew that human benefit and community progress would thereby result. So did Booker T. Washington, who to the end of his days lived out his concern "to bring the strong, wealthy, and learned into helpful touch with the poorest, most ignorant, and humblest, and at the same time make one appreciate the vitalizing, strengthening influences of the other."³ Such is the way of human helpfulness. Such is the way of the Lord.

NOTES

1. See Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1953, 1901 ed.), p. 293.
2. See his sermon, "Public Spirit," in John Watson (Ian Maclaren), *Respectable Sins* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), p. 236.
3. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, p. 299.

