

Self-love, Selfishness, and the Gospel

By Richard Baxter

[Richard Baxter was an English Puritan pastor who lived from 1615-1691]

The principal part of selfishness consists in an inordinate self-love. This is a corruption so deep in the heart of man, that it may be called his very natural inclination, which therefore lies at the bottom, below all his actual sins whatsoever; and must be changed into a new nature, which principally consists in the love of God. This is original sin itself, even the heart of it. This speaks what man by nature is; even an inordinate self-lover; and as he is, so he will act. In this, all other vice in the world is virtually contained.

Selfishness is most contrary to God, and would rob Him of all His rights as God, and God would be no God, if the selfish sinner had his will and did not heartily consent that God should be God to him. I have formerly told you, that self is the god of wicked men, or the world's great idol; and that the inordinate love of pleasure, profits, and honour in trinity, are what this self-love consists of; and that the malignant trinity of God's enemies, the flesh is the first and foundation, the world the second, and the devil the third.

Every man is an idolator, so far as he is selfish. God is not just a name. The one that takes away God's essence, or attributes and prerogatives, and yet thinks he believes in God, because he leaves Him His name and titles, does as bad as they that set up an image, and worship that instead of God, or that worship the sun or moon as gods because they somewhat represent His glory; for sure a bare name has little substance as an image; much less can you say it has more than the sun. Now selfish, ungodly men do all of them rob God, and give His honour and prerogatives to themselves, and put Him off with empty tides; they call Him their God, but will not have Him for their end, their portion, and felicity (happiness), nor give Him the strongest love of their hearts: they Will not take Him as their absolute owner...They Will not take Him for their Sovereign, and be ruled by Him, nor deny themselves for Him, nor seek His honour and interest above their own. They call Him their Father, but deny Him His Honour; and their Master, but give Him not His fear (Malachi 1:6). They depend not on His hand, and live not by His law, and to His glory; and therefore they do not take Him for their God. And can you expect that God should save those that deny Him, and would dethrone Him, that is, His very enemies?

1. They would be their own end, and look no further.

- 2. They use all creatures but as means to this end; yes, God Himself is esteemed but for themselves.**
- 3. They love their present life and prosperity better than God.**
- 4. They would be their own, and live as their own.**
- 5. They would have the creatures to be their own, and use them as their own, and not as God's.**
- 6. They must care for themselves, and shift for themselves, and dare not trust themselves wholly upon God.**
- 7. They would dispose of themselves and their own conditions, and of all other things.**
- 8. They would rule themselves, and be out from under the laws and government of God.**
- 9. They would be the rulers of all others, and have all men do their wills.**
- 10. And they would be honoured and admired by all, and have the praise ascribed to them. And if all this is not to set themselves up as their own god or idols in the world, I do not know what is.**

God will not save those that make themselves their own gods, when they have rejected Him. But all these unsanctified, selfish men do make themselves their own gods; for in all the ten particulars before mentioned, they take to themselves the prerogatives of God:

Certainly God is so far from having a thought of saving such vile idolators (in this condition), that they are the principal objects of His high displeasure, and the fairest marks of His justice to shoot at: and He is engaged to pull them down, and tread them into hell. Should God stand by and see a company of rebellious sinners sit down in His throne, or usurp His sovereignty and divine rights as God, and let them alone, yes, and even advance them to His glory? No, He has resolved that *"he that humbleth himself shall be exalted, and he that exalteth himself shall be brought low."* And what higher self-exaltation can there be, than to make ourselves as gods to ourselves? And therefore who should be brought lower than such?

No man can be a Christian that takes not Christ for his Lord and Saviour; but no man without this self-denial can take Christ for his Lord and Saviour, and therefore no man without self-denial can be a Christian and so be saved. He that makes himself his end, cannot make Christ, as Christ, his way; for Christ is the way to the Father, and not to carnal self. No, the business that Christ came upon into the world, was to pull down and subdue this self. Moreover, whoever taketh Christ for his Saviour, must know from what it is that he must save him; and that is principally from self: and no man can take Christ for his Saviour that does not renounce his own self-confidence, and is not willing to be saved from the idolatry of self-exaltation. No man can take Christ for his Master or Teacher, that comes not into His school as a little child, renouncing the guidance of carnal self, and sensible of his need of a heavenly teacher.

No man can take Christ for his King and Lord, and give up himself to Him as His own, and as His subject, that hath not learned to deny that self that claims priority and sovereignty in His place. There is no antichrist, nor false Christ, that ever was in the world, that doth more truly oppose Christ, and resist Him in all the parts of His office, than carnal self. It is this that will not stoop to His righteousness, or to His guidance, and to His teaching and holy government. Self is the false Christ or Saviour of the world, as well as the false god. And therefore there can be no salvation where self is not denied and taken down.

Every man and woman on earth that take themselves for true Christians, and yet do not deny themselves, even life and all, for the sake of Christ and the hope of everlasting glory, are mere self-deceivers, and no true Christians at all...It is impossible for that man to be Christ's disciple, that loveth his life better than Christ and the hopes of life everlasting (Matthew 10:37-38 & Luke 14:26, 27, & 33)...But I beseech you, remember that this is the lowest degree of self-denial that is saving, to set more by Christ and the hopes of glory than by all this world and life itself; and to be habitually resolved to forsake life and all, rather than to forsake Him. No less than this is proper self-denial, or will prove you Christians and in a state of life...For this is the very point in which Christ, for instance, puts our self-denial to the trial, "he that will save his life, shall lose it" Whether you love an immortal, holy life with God, or this earthly, fleshly life better, is the great question on which it will be resolved whether you are Christians or infidels at the heart, and whether you are heirs of heaven or hell...

I confess that flesh and blood must needs think this is a very hard saying; though they might consent to acknowledge it a duty, and a reasonable thing to die for Christ, and a note of excellency, and a

commendable qualification of some few extraordinary saints, yet it goes down very hard with them that it should be the lowest measure of saving grace, and that the weakest Christian must have it that will be saved: for, say they, what can the strongest do more than die for Christ? But to this I answer: There is no room for objections against so plain a word of God. It is the wisdom of God, and not our reason, that disposeth of the crown of life; and therefore it is His wisdom, and not our reason, that must determine how we shall attain it. And if God said plainly, that "*if any man come to Christ, and hate not his own life,* (that is, love it not so much less than Christ, that for His sake he can use it as a hated thing is used) *he cannot be His disciple,*" Luke 14:26; it is too late for the vote of man, or all the clamour of foolish reason, to recall this resolution. The word of God will stand when they have talked against it never so long: we may destroy ourselves by dashing against it, but we cannot destroy or frustrate it.