

The Big Me or the Living God?

Proverbs 1:8-19; 3:1-8

Let's begin this morning with a story about President Bush--President George H.W. Bush or George the First. When he was growing up, he was taught that he should resist the tendency to talk too much about himself. He tried to practice that lesson throughout his life. If a speech writer put the pronoun "I" into one of his speeches, he would by instinct cross it out. His political advisors, however, told him that if he hoped to get elected as President, he needed to talk more about his accomplishments. So every now and then he gave into their advice and said something about himself. But the next day he would receive a phone call from his mother. "George, you're talking about yourself again."¹

That's a fascinating story. Here is a man in his mid-60s who is running for the presidency of the United States. You would think that his mother might cut him a little slack. No! "George, stop talking so much about yourself!"

If we wanted, we could explore the dynamics of that relationship between mother and son, but there is more to it than that. It's a story that also reveals a change that has taken place in our culture, and it's a change that we need to understand. Over the last 50 or 60 years our way of thinking has been transformed. Today we live in an age characterized by what sociologists call "expressive individualism."

Expressive Individualism

"Expressive individualism." That's a wonderful term if you are a sociologist, but what does it actually describe? One observer has put it much more simply. He says that today we live in the culture of the Big Me. The Big Me! Today we're given the message that the most important value is my individual freedom, and the most sought-after goal in life should be my personal fulfillment. You and I have all that we need right within ourselves. Don't let any outside force tell you what to do. It doesn't make any difference what some other person or some religious tradition tells you to do. Just look within yourself, and there you'll find all the direction that you need for life.

So we hear slogans like "Find yourself." "Love yourself." "Be true to yourself." "Live your own truth."

This mentality of the Big Me is not just a characteristic of our culture at large. It has also seeped into the church. That's not surprising. You and I are inevitably affected by the culture that surrounds us, so we can unknowingly allow that way of thinking to slowly and subtly shape our lives as Christians.

Think about it this way. Early in our Christian lives we learn a simple and basic theological truth:

GOD loves me.

When we first genuinely grasp that truth, it comes with a sense of surprise and joy. "GOD loves me. Why? Why would the God of the universe care about me? In the long course of human existence, I am so small and insignificant. Why would God care about me at all? And it's more than that. I haven't lived the way that God wants me to live. I've ignored him and have often dismissed him as unimportant and irrelevant. So why would the one true God want to love me? But the Bible says that he does want to love me even though I don't in any way deserve his attention! He sent his own Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for the punishment of my sins so that I could be totally forgiven and so that I could become his precious child. All I need to do is to admit that I don't deserve his love and then tell God that I am counting on Jesus to qualify me for his love." That message is such good news that it is really hard to believe that it could be true!

That's the attitude that we have when we first grasp the good news of Jesus Christ, but as time goes on, we subtly change. Now we look at the Christian life this way:

God loves me.

¹ David Brooks. *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 6.

Same words. Same basic theology. The only change is that we've gotten used to it. We've gradually lost that element of surprise and joy. "God loves me. Well, that's God's job. Oh, it's good to be reminded of that. But what else is new?"

Do you see any of yourself in that change? Have you gotten used to the message of God's love? We can all fall prey to that tendency, can't we?

But then our modern culture begins to work on us. The culture of expressive individualism seeps into our minds. We begin to think this way:

God loves **ME**.

Same words. It sounds like the same theology, but it's not. The emphasis is now on me. Now we have, in effect, started to worship the Big Me! Our sense of wonder and amazement has been replaced by a sense of expectation. "God loves me. Well, he is supposed to love me. Frankly, I'm not always sure that he's doing such a good job." Oh, we wouldn't come right out and say that, but deep within us that's what we expect or maybe even demand. "God owes me his love."

What a change has taken place. The words may sound the same and look much the same, but our approach to the Christian life has changed. We acknowledge God, but we concentrate on ourselves. In effect, God has been demoted from being our loving Lord and Master to being our dutiful servant and therapist.

Think about where that leads. With this approach, we also find it so much easier to rationalize what we do. We may think about doing something that our culture encourages but that we know is wrong. But it's something that we really want! So we tell ourselves, "God loves me. God wants me to be happy. I need to be happy. I deserve to be happy. So it really is OK. And God will understand because God loves ME!"

Do you see any of that mentality in the church today? Do you see any of that in yourself?

Once we realize how we all have been affected by the culture of the Big Me, then we should understand why it is so crucial that we examine our lives and our hearts. We need to ask hard questions about ourselves. Are we bowing before the Big Me, or are we submitting to the living God? Today in this culture of expressive individualism—in this day of the Big Me, we need to understand how God has created this world and how he governs this world of his. One of the best places to gain that wisdom is the Old Testament book of Proverbs.

The Message of Proverbs

When I retired several years ago, I decided that I would read a book on the theology of the Old Testament. That's not everybody's idea of a fun retirement, but I set that goal for myself. The book was written by a highly respected Old Testament scholar named Bruce Waltke. It was a long book, but it was filled with so many valuable insights into the Old Testament. One thing that struck me was the way he summarized the message of the book of Proverbs. Here is his summary:

Character determines conduct determines consequences.²

Earlier in our worship, we read Proverbs 1:8-19. Verse 10 gives the instruction: "My son, if sinful men entice you, do not give in to them." There is the element of character. Verse 16 explains that sinful people do sinful things. "For their feet rush into evil, they are swift to shed blood." Verse 18 explains what that leads to. "These men lie in wait for their own blood; they ambush only themselves." Can you see the pattern? Sinful people do sinful things and end up suffering for it.

Character determines conduct determines consequences.

² Bruce K. Waltke. *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 924.

Proverbs 3 describes the same pattern but from a positive perspective.

¹My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
²for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you peace and prosperity.

³Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
⁴Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
⁶in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.

⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.
⁸This will bring health to your body
and nourishment to your bones.

Other verses in Proverbs provide that same teaching:

The wages of the righteous is life,
but the earnings of the wicked are sin and death. (Prov. 10:16)

The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity. (Prov. 11:3)

The LORD detests all the proud of heart.
Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. (Prov. 16:5)

Character determines conduct determines consequences.

We start with character. Who are we inside? What motivates us? What is that we desire the most? What is it that stirs our hearts? That's character.

Unfortunately, we don't hear as much about the importance of character today as we used to, but it is a quality that has been honored all through history. Character counts. Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said, "Character is destiny." That puts it so concisely.

A hundred years ago, Teddy Roosevelt, summarized the principle this way: "Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike."³

Think about Martin Luther King, Jr. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, he said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."⁴ The "content of their character"! Martin Luther King knew that it's who we are inside that is crucial. Character counts.

³ Margaret Miner and Hugh Rawson. *The Oxford Dictionary of American Quotations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 105.

⁴ Rev. Martin Luther King, "I Have A Dream," accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>.

Character is crucial because it will determine our conduct. I think back to a man named Jeb Magruder. In the 1970s Magruder was a White House aide to President Nixon. He was part of the Watergate scandal. Look at his description of the process he went through. It started with his thinking or what was going on inside of him, and that led to his actions. "We had conned ourselves into thinking that we weren't doing anything really wrong, and by the time we were doing things that were illegal, we had lost control. We had gone from poor ethical behavior into illegal activities without even realizing it."⁵

Character determines conduct determines consequences.

Do you remember the name, Bernie Madoff? About ten years we heard his name a lot in the news. Bernie Madoff was a stock broker in New York. He was one of the most successful and richest of all the stock brokers on Wall Street because somehow he could earn more money for his clients than any other stock broker. People were practically begging him to manage their portfolios. But he didn't really earn more money for his clients. Instead he was running what's called a Ponzi scheme.

In a Ponzi scheme the operator of the scheme takes money from new clients to pay earlier clients. So in order to make it work and look legitimate, the operator of the scheme has to keep getting more and more money from more and more new investors. When he can't get enough new investors to pay off the earlier investors, the whole scheme collapses. Bernie Madoff made it work for years, but eventually it caught up with him. In 2009 he was convicted of cheating his clients out of \$64 billion dollars, and he was sentenced to 150 years in prison. That's where he is today.

Character determines conduct determines consequences.

This chain of character and conduct and consequences is one of the essential features that God has built into this world of his.

Living Wisely

We need to understand it, and we need to live according to it. This foundational principle of life in God's world does two things for us. First, it serves as a message of assurance to us. When we see people getting away with and profiting from wrong, it's so easy to become cynical. "Life just isn't fair. That's the way it works. It doesn't pay to try to do what is right and just." We may not come right out and say that, but that attitude can build up within us and sour our entire perspective on life. We need to guard against that cynicism.

I think of another proverbial saying. This one doesn't come from the Old Testament. It's found in Paul's New Testament letter to the Galatians. Paul writes in Galatians 6:7, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." Let those words sink in. We can be deceived. We are all capable of being fooled. It's easy to think that there is no justice in this world. But that's not true! God is not deceived, and he will not be mocked. He knows exactly what is going on. It may take time for the consequences of wrongdoing to be felt, but those consequences will come—if not in this life then surely in eternity. God will make sure of that. You can be assured of that. Evil deeds will be punished.

That leads to the second benefit that comes from this principle. This teaching of Proverbs provides us with assurance. It also provides us with the guidance that we need for living day to day. It pays to examine your character, and it pays to obey God.

Sadly, none of us possess the character that we know we should have or that we like to imagine that we do have. We all do things that are wrong. None of us live the way that we know we should. None of us! Isn't that true? So what should you and I do when we seeing ourselves drifting away from God's ways?

⁵ Quoted in Jerry White. *Honesty, Morality and Conscience* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1979), 410.

One of my favorite verses in Proverbs is found in chapter 28 verse 13: “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” What a wise and wonderful verse. When you and I have done something wrong or said something wrong, we need to humble ourselves before God and others and then admit it. It’s that simple. But it’s also so hard to do, isn’t it? But when we do muster the courage to take that step, we do find mercy. Confession is hard, but it is so healthy.

One of the most remarkable stories of confession that I know of comes from the life of Alexander Hamilton. In the 1790s Hamilton was the Secretary of the United States Treasury. During that time, he had an affair with a married woman named Maria Reynolds. Her husband found out about the affair and used it to blackmail Hamilton. He said that he would overlook the affair if Hamilton paid him \$600; later on, he demanded another \$400. Hamilton paid him both times. Hamilton also made sure that he received a signed receipt for his payments.

In December of 1792, three Congressmen learned about the affair. They immediately confronted Secretary Hamilton at his office. He refused to talk to them there, but he said that he would meet with them that evening at his home. When they arrived that night, he surprised them. Hamilton wanted to make sure that they did not think that he had misused his office and taken any money from the U.S. Treasury, so he gave them a full confession about his affair with Maria Reynolds. In fact, he backed up his account of the affair by showing them the letters that he had exchanged with Maria. He even showed the Congressmen the receipts for the payments he had made to her husband. The Congressmen were so overwhelmed with his response that halfway through his explanation, they begged him to stop. But he refused and continued to explain every last detail. In fact, his confession was so complete and detailed that the Congressmen promised him that they would tell anyone else about the affair.

Four years later, however, the news leaked out. What did Alexander Hamilton do then? Here is the most incredible part of the story. Hamilton didn't deny the affair, and he didn't attack the people who had leaked it to the press. Instead he paid for the publication of a booklet in which he informed the public of all the sordid details of his affair.⁶

Now that’s confession. No excusing. No dismissing it as unimportant. No attacking his enemies. Just a straightforward and honest confession. That’s the kind of confession that God honors. As Proverbs 28:13 says, “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”

Conclusion

Let’s think about one final verse from the Old Testament book of Proverbs. This verse summarizes the entire message this morning.

Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.
Proverbs 4:23

Guard your heart! Who are you and I inside? That’s what really counts. Everything will flow from that. Do we engage in lying? Do we give into our anger? Do we live for the Big Me? Or do we aim at humbling ourselves before the living God, telling the truth, caring about others, forgiving our enemies, and practicing confession? “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

This sermon was preached via livestream at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on May 3, 2020 by Dr. Frederic M. Martin.

⁶ Shelley Ross. *Fall from Grace*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 20-28.