

Understanding the Error of Self-Actualization Preached in the Name of the Gospel

Since the dawn of the “positive thinking” message of Norman Vincent Peale in the 20th century, there has been an avalanche of preachers teaching variations of this message. (The “health and wealth” prosperity gospel, “name it and claim it,” along with various modes of motivational types of preaching.) Although this positive message extracts truth from Scripture and has great merit, when isolated outside the whole counsel of God, it can be misleading and even disheartening for adherents who fail to see their dreams come true. Furthermore, when the objective is “self-fulfillment,” the message often reduces the gospel of Christ to appease the narcissistic dreams of half-baked Christians.

Although Scripture teaches us to focus our thoughts upon things that are true, noble and lovely, it is spoken in the context of dealing with relational conflict and financial challenges. That is to say, there is no denial of life’s challenges, but an appeal to intentionally trust God in our thought life during these situations.

The following are nine errors of the gospel of self-fulfillment:

1. The cross of Christ is absent. I have read many motivational Christian and secular books from all genres and the one glaring truth that is missing is the cross of Christ. Jesus plainly told His followers that they had to take up their cross and follow Him (Matt. 16:24). Therefore, we are called to appropriate the power of the finished work of Calvary to our own self-centered desires so we can fulfill His will. (For hyper-grace preachers who teach that the gospel

message of the cross is not relevant to the church, read Romans 6 and Galatians 2:19-20 to see how the apostle Paul taught the church to apply the cross to their own flesh).

The reason why the cross is absent from the gospel of self-fulfillment is because it is antithetical to its essence. The cross rebuts the notion of attempting to live a life without suffering as it also controverts the notion of living a life based on self-fulfillment. In reality, God calls us to do many things that we do not like and that do not grant us great happiness (some examples may include changing diapers in the middle of the night, loving others unconditionally, and laboring in the ministry without appreciation or without seeing immediate fruit). Paul even said that he did not count his life of any value, that he may finish the ministry the Lord gave him (Acts 20:24). I have found that when you try to empower believers without preaching the cross, they invariably will attempt to serve God in their own strength and will fail miserably.

2. It empowers egocentric dreams. One of the famous mantras in the world today is that "you can be anything you want to be," or "all our dreams can come true." The reality is, not all of our dreams and desires are God-given or grounded in reality. (Reality includes self-awareness regarding one's own natural ability and talent.) When we preach to people that they can be anything they want to be, we set them up for disillusionment if their desire is not rooted in God.

3. There is rarely a mention of sin. Although I have read dozens of motivational books, I do not remember reading anything substantive about the consequences of sinful living. These books and preachers seem to only focus on "positive things" and rarely mention how the practice of conscious sin can derail a person's calling. Unfortunately, this gives believers the impression that living a holy life is inconsequential to fulfilling their purpose. Of course, Scripture teaches us that nothing can be further from the

truth (Read 1 Cor. 10:6-14; Heb. 3, 4).

4. People are not taught to admit weakness. Second Corinthians 11 and 12 detail how the apostle Paul had no issue with bragging about his weaknesses. This grounded Paul and his readers in reality and helped them understand how believers need to depend upon the power of Christ to fulfill their calling. Unfortunately, many in the “self-fulfillment” camp rarely admit their weaknesses in public because it goes against their public personification of perfection, personal victory and success.

5. It promotes the fallacy of no limitations. Another lesson I have learned is that I have personal limitations. Understanding my natural and spiritual strengths, proclivities, and weaknesses helps me focus. I do not waste my time trying to walk outside the lane of my assignment and abilities. This flies in the face of those who take Paul out of context and cite “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” In this passage, Paul was not referring to accomplishing whatever he wanted but fulfilling God’s call in spite of his financial challenges (see Phil. 4:10-13).

6. Failure and pain are not part of the process. Another life lesson I have learned is that I cannot avoid pain in the process of fulfilling my purpose in Christ. Sometimes pain is self-inflicted and can be avoided; but oftentimes, it is out of our control, since it has to do with the deleterious actions of others. However, like the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul, every leader in the kingdom will likely suffer a form of betrayal from one or more of their close associates, friends and even family.

Also, sometimes we make wrong decisions in life that cause us to fail in a particular endeavor. The only person who does not fail is the person who never attempts to do anything challenging. The key to success is not to avoid failure, but to “fall forward” and learn from the experience.

Unfortunately, many motivational speakers and books are not honest with their followers regarding the inevitability of pain and failure. Even many faith teachers have taught that we should always go from “victory to victory” without laying out the challenging process between the beginning and end of an endeavor.

7. The goal is often happiness. Many come to church seeking happiness, but happiness is not the top priority God has for us in this life. Our highest calling is to know God and obey Him, not to seek a life of self-fulfillment and pleasure (read Phil. 3:3-12). I have found that the unhappiest people I know are the ones whose primary motivation in life is to be happy! This is because every time something happens that goes against their craving for happiness, they become unhappy. The happiest people on earth are the ones who live to serve God and others. Those are the happiest people on earth.

8. It is individualistic. Another grave error of the gospel of self-fulfillment is the fact that it is based upon individual fulfillment and destiny. In Scripture, there is no such thing as an individual earthly vision, mission, purpose and destiny. Everything we do is interrelated with other people because we are all part of the same body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27). For example, the Old Testament was written to the nation of Israel and the New Testament was written for the benefit of the church. Most promises and passages cannot be properly interpreted and applied outside of the context of these two entities (Israel and the church). Of course, the major exception to this is when every person stands before the judgment seat of Christ; there we will stand as individuals without the ability to use another person or situation as a scapegoat (2 Cor. 5:10).

9. It doesn't teach the whole council of God. The apostle Paul said that he was free from the blood of all men because he taught them the whole council of God (Acts 20:26-27). When we only accentuate certain truths to the exclusion of other

truths in the Bible, we are guilty of reflecting the wrong image of God and His Word. Many preachers of the gospel of self-fulfillment focus on the goodness and love of God to the exclusion of His righteousness, holiness and justice. Scripture teaches us that righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne (or rule); hence, when we exclude this side of God, we are left without a divine foundation.

After all, we cannot fully appreciate the love of God for us in Christ until we also understand the righteous wrath of God against sin, and we cannot understand God's goodness until we grasp how He loved and saved us in spite of His holy hatred against sin. When we only preach the love and goodness of God, we can give the impression that God winks at sin and that believers can live any way they want without fear of divine retribution. This opposes the passages in Scripture that warn all people, including believers, that we will reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7-9; Eph. 5:2-6).

In closing, I have read dozens of motivational books and may continue to read more, because they have some good truths regarding positive thinking, faith, and the maximization of our God-given abilities and talents. However, it would be a huge mistake to limit my reading to this particular genre, since it often only accentuates certain aspects of God's nature and character to the exclusion of His other attributes. When we only expose ourselves to one genre of teaching, we become unbalanced and will eventually find out our belief does not correspond with real-life experience.