

# “Celebrities and Saints”

a sermon by

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**Text: “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good,  
evil lies close at hand.” (Romans 7:21)**

I recently encountered an article by David Brooks in the *New York Times* entitled “The Gospel of Mel Gibson.” As all of us are painfully aware, Mel Gibson has been in the news over the past few weeks concerning his relationship with his former mistress, who also is the mother of one of his children.

Brooks finds Gibson interesting not because of what he may or may not have done or even what kind of serious illness his behavior exhibits, but as a symbol of something he represents, he is a very real model of what Brooks calls the “modern narcissist.”

Now the love of self is a very basic human attribute. At some level it is present in every person. Narcissism, however, is self-love on steroids. The narcissistic person is marked by a grandiose self-image, constant need for admiration, and general lack of empathy for others. At its best, narcissism can be harnessed for good. Several years ago the *Harvard Business Review* published an article of personality types who succeed at business. One of the most successful types was described as “narcissistic,” in this case a business leader who has a great deal of vision and can understand how a particular business can be successful in terms of the context in which the business finds itself. These types of leaders have energy, vision, and are generally very outgoing. One of the examples of this type of leader was Jack Welch, who for many years led General Electric during a very successful time of growth.

At its worst narcissism is a personality disorder that according to the National Institute of Health affects 6.2 percent of the American people.

There used to be theories that narcissists feel unworthy, but recent research doesn’t support this. Instead, it seems, the narcissist’s self directed passion is deep and sincere.

The tragedy of narcissism is that it puts an individual at not only the center of his or her world, but at the center of the universe.

## I.

In Romans, chapter 7, we find one of the most famous passages in the Pauline literature. In this passage Paul demonstrates one of the most painful experiences that any of us can feel. It is not as if he is only estranged from God and from other people. He is also estranged from himself. The good that he wishes to do he does not do, and the evil that he knows he should not do is what in fact he does do.

There are a number of reasons that this passage is such a critical one.

One reason is that it gives a powerful description of the human dilemma. It is not that we don't know what we are to do. It is that for some reason we cannot do the right, but do the wrong instead.

One of the most important books written in the past century was a book by Reinhold Niebuhr entitled *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. The book had its origins in the Gifford Lecture Series which Niebuhr gave in Edinburgh, Scotland. Niebuhr gave a series of ten lectures over a period of two weeks. Each lecture was two hours long and Niebuhr at no point in the series used any notes.

Niebuhr had been nurtured in the liberal theology of the Nineteenth Century that believed in human goodness and human progress. But Niebuhr saw that there was something lacking in this theology, namely, a sense of the reality of human sinfulness.

One of the great influences of Niebuhr was his experience as a pastor in a working class church in Detroit. He once told of an experience that had a great impact on him. He was teaching a group of Middle School children about Jesus' teaching of "The Sermon on the Mount." He explained to them Jesus emphasis on "turning the other cheek" and on "loving one's enemy." One of the young boys raised a question that troubled Niebuhr. This young boy had lost his father a few years earlier. He helped his struggling mother and family by selling newspapers on the street corner. Often the boys fought with one another to see who would get the best spot, which meant that that person would make the most money. The question the young boy had for Dr. Niebuhr was whether he should fight the other boys for the best spot, thus being more able to help his mother and family, or following the words of Jesus, give the best spot to other boys, thus hurting his own family.

Niebuhr had to admit to himself that he had no easy answer to the young boy's dilemma. He thus came to believe that many ethical dilemmas do not present us with a choice of choosing between good and evil but with having to choose between the lesser of two evils. When one thinks of this, one thinks of issues like abortion and divorce where often people are face with two very bad alternatives. The same is true with the issue of war.

Niebuhr finally concluded that the ethic of Jesus was what he called "impossible possibility." On the one hand Jesus commands us to "be perfect" and to "resist not evil." These, of course, are impossible. But, on the other hand, the ethic of Jesus is an ethic of love, which means

that there is no situation in which we cannot apply the ethic of love, which means we are always called to a higher goal.

## II.

There is another reason that this passage is important and it is the fact that it is placed before Paul's great passage of God's grace in Romans, chapter 8. For if Romans 7 describes the dilemma of human existence, Romans 8 points us to the way out. In this chapter Paul raises the question: "Who can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ?" He then immediately calls out the most obvious possibilities: death, life, principalities, powers, heights, depths, things present, things to come. Then he concludes by saying that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ."

Today, we are living in a narcissistic culture that worship celebrities. This culture of self-love has certainly affected the churches as well where many of our best known religious personalities proclaim the gospel of self-fulfillment and self-love.

That is why the church over the years has tried to point people away from celebrities to saints, individuals who instead of always striving to point attention to themselves, spent a great deal of their time and energy serving other people.

Each fall, when I am at Princeton Seminary, I spend some time in the library reading room which hosts almost every theological periodical in the world. Around the room are a series of portraits of famous graduates of the seminary: Charles Hodge, Bruce Metzger, and other scholars and preachers. On one wall is the portrait of a man by the name of Toyohiko Kagawa, a citizen of Japan who attended Princeton Seminary in the 1920's. Kagawa was born to a wealthy family but forswore that wealth to work in the slums of Japan. After World War II he was generally regarded as the single most important person in helping Japan recover from the terrible devastation of the war.

Some years ago Princeton Seminary invited Kagawa to the seminary to speak. By then he was an old man, bent over, and almost blind. The years of living in the slums had taken a toll on him. After his speech, as the students were leaving Miller Chapel, a woman overheard two students talking. One said to his friend, "Well, he didn't have much to say, did he?" The woman interrupted the conversation by saying, "A man on a cross doesn't have to say much, does he?"

Jesus said that "Whosoever seeks to save his life will lose it, but whosoever seeks to lose his life for my sake and for the gospel will find it.

Surely, as we come to this table, we are reminded of the one who did not seek his own glory but gave himself that we might have life eternal.

Amen!