

The story is told of a man who had his boss over for dinner. Repeatedly the boss said, in the course of conversation, “You know, I am a self-made man.” At a certain point, the host excused himself from the table and went into the kitchen. His daughter followed him into the kitchen, and when she knew the coast was clear, she asked, “Daddy, if he’s a self-made man, why did he make himself that way?”

Few attitudes so harm relationships both outside and inside the church as what the apostle Paul calls “selfish ambition” and “vain conceit.” We can get our minds so set on our own ideas and desires that our relationships suffer. We don’t see things clearly. We brace up, assert control, expect people to fall in line, ignoring the interests of others and of Christ himself.

Of all the threats to the integrity of our relationships and unity in the church, being “full of oneself” may be the greatest. It’s no wonder that when Paul lists the works of our sinful nature, he includes “selfish ambition.” People full of themselves see themselves everywhere. Another’s success makes them see their own lack of it. Another’s failure makes them glad it wasn’t theirs. People full of themselves have no room for the needs of others, no room for a word from God, no room for improvement. Why? Because they’re already full...of themselves.

This problem, as you might expect, goes all the way back to the beginning. Adam and Eve entertained the temptation of the serpent to “become like God,” to doubt what God had said, and what is that but an invitation to become full of yourself? And if you’re paying attention, you will hear this still being offered by the world as conventional wisdom, if not inspiring advice: put yourself at the center of your life and don’t let anyone else tell you what to do, not even God. If that leads to your destruction, at least you’ll have fun on your downward spiral.

When it’s stated that way, you’d think we would know better. But at various times, it just seems so right to indulge yourself, to elevate yourself, to take a seat on the throne of your life, and, from there, to rule. But then along comes Jesus, who says that if anyone, anyone wants to follow him, he or she must deny self. He or she must vacate the throne. You can’t worship God if the one who’s really calling the shots is you. You can’t look out for others if you’re full of yourself. There’s no room.

So what’s the antidote? The solution is a change of mind—a new mindset. In fact, it’s the adoption of four new attitudes. Before we get to that, though, let me show you what must happen first if we are ever to lose the sinful self that has filled us for so long.

It works like this. Jesus comes to us, in water poured over us in the triune Name; in a Word, he comes; He comes in a Meal. Jesus lived for us, flawlessly, a righteous life, through and through. He poured out his life for us, emptying himself. He died for us, unselfishly, taking our punishment on himself. When you realize, perhaps suddenly, or perhaps over many years, how much Jesus loves you, you will also see how small your full self is, compared to that vast expanse of his love. The Bible stories become ours. The more Jesus fills us through Word and Sacrament, the less room there is for our old selves. But some else happens, too. The Holy Spirit

actually builds in our minds the attitudes of our Savior, Jesus. You can know that this is happening when you think more highly of Jesus than you do yourself, you start to truly care about what he has said and done and find yourself saying and doing very similar things. In other words, more of Jesus, and less of me, becomes my lived experience, and I want more of it.

Theologians call it sanctification. It's almost like absorption through osmosis. Or, it's like two people who spend a lot of time together, to the extent that they sound alike, think alike, maybe finish each other's sentences. They know what the other will probably order for dinner, what the other needs when not feeling well, you get the idea. These are handles for us to grasp what Paul means when he writes, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."

The attitude of Christ Jesus accumulates over time as you meet Jesus in his Word; as you ponder the significance of your baptism; as you receive him in Holy Communion. He speaks; you listen and respond. More and more, you look forward to those times devoted to being with him. You begin to see him everywhere, rather than reflections of yourself.

The following is a true story, told by a brother pastor. He knew of a seven-year-old girl who went through serious organ transplant surgery, spent time at home, and finally came back to church one Sunday. Above their altar was a statue of Jesus, hands extended, glorious, caring, welcoming. She walked into church with her mom, looked up, and gasped with delight. "Look Mom," she said. "Jesus is still here."

It's true. He is. It is his constant, relentless love that empties us of our old selves, and it is his constant, relentless love that leaves a deposit in our hearts, souls, and yes, even our minds. Here in his letter to the Philippians, Paul celebrates the attitude of Jesus. He also says Jesus' mindset should overlap with your mindset, and names four ways this is true.

First, is the service mindset. Jesus made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. This was a deliberate decision and action on our Lord's part. He did not hang onto his divine power or prerogatives as God, but emptied himself in order to serve. This willingness to set self aside and tend to the needs of someone else is one new mindset that Christians receive from Christ. In fact, he goes so far as to say that a servant mentality is how greatness is defined in His Kingdom.

Second, is the humility mindset. Paul writes that "Jesus humbled himself." Again, this was a deliberate decision and action on our Lord's part. If our problem is being full of ourselves, humility means being empty of self-concern, so that Jesus can fill us. As the author C.S. Lewis so famously put it, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of your self, less." You and I resemble Jesus when serving others eclipses any other concern that I may have, and we're not even thinking, how does this make me look?

Third, is the obedience mindset. Remember, Paul wrote, "Jesus humbled himself and became obedient unto death." Jesus' attitude was always one of obedience to His Father, and it was an obedience rooted in love. We are like Jesus when we live for God, and do things His way, because we want to please Him and say thank you with our lives. The mindset of obedience sees the wisdom in doing God's work God's way.

Fourth is the mindset of sacrifice. Jesus became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Jesus became the ultimate sacrificial lamb for our sakes, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We have forgiveness, new life, and salvation from death and hell because of the sacrifice Jesus made. It stands to reason that we will occasionally be asked to sacrifice for the good of someone else, and when that happens, we have the attitude of Jesus to inform us. We learn, over time, that to give up something in the name of Jesus is not a loss.

Absorbing the attitude of Jesus is a good in itself. It enables you to release true goodness into a world that is starved for it. However, the mindset we glean from Jesus is also preparing us for something spectacular. At the end of Jesus' completed mission, He was exalted. As we confess in our creeds, He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. We look forward to the life of the world to come, because we trust that it too is a gift from the Father. His presence with Jesus and the Holy Spirit will be our perfect joy forever.

In the meantime, you have before you a lifetime of opportunities to see things as Jesus would see them, to think of things as Jesus would think of them, to act as He would act. To really know Him is to love Him, and to serve Him in humility, obedience, and sacrifice.