

Watch Yourself

Sometimes we can be so intent on watching what's going on around us that we forget where we are ... and land in a pile of trouble. I remember once when one of Patti's brothers was helping the other with a roofing project. He was so focused on laying out the roofing that he forgot that he was a full story above the ground, and backed off the edge of the roof to the ground below. Just missed a pile of wood and landed in some soft, wet grass.

The Darwin Awards website contains some famous examples of people who forgot where they were just long enough to light a match, butt out a cigarette or fly a kite with a thin copper string into a high-tension power line. But the story I can tell you in detail was that of an 80+ year-old woman who was pulled over by a police officer. He came to the window of her car and asked her if she knew she had been speeding. She beat the ticket with this response: "I had to speed or I would forget where I was going." Now that's awareness -- "if I don't get there quickly, I'll forget where I was going."

The cell phone camera has instigated a new trend in society ... the "selfie", self portraits that come at arms length. Here are some "selfies" in which the person taking the picture forgot where they were, or forgot that there was something about their environment that might effect the picture in a negative way.

1. in a windstorm
2. looking at the sun
3. be careful when there's a camel nearby
4. the hat, it's the hat
5. the "I'm a tourist among the ruins taking a selfie on the end of a stick wearing strange yellow glasses selfie"
6. the camera decides where to focus selfie
7. the "I need to be more aware of what's lying on the ground at 1 o'clock beside my head" selfie.

In today's passage, we are encouraged to watch ourselves, not by taking selfies all the time, but by observing ourselves in the context of what's going on all around us. We're asked to take a close look at ourselves in three important areas, which we'll see in the passage from Galatians 6:

Dear friends, if a Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.

I want you to notice as we go through this passage the three times where Paul uses the word "yourself", okay?

Be careful not to fall into the same temptaiton yourself. Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ. If you think you are too important to help someone in need, you are only fooling yourself. You are really a nobody. Be sure to do what you should, for then you will enjoy the personal satisfaction of having done your work well, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else. For we are each responsible for our own conduct.

The first “watch yourself” comes when you are involved in a situation involving someone who has gotten caught up in sin. What’s the first thing we think about when we hear that a friend, someone in our Bible Study group, someone we talk to nearly every week, that that person has fallen into some kind of addiction, has crossed the line and is involved in something he or she shouldn’t be involved in? If we’re immature in the faith we might think some pretty arrogant thoughts, feeling superior, feeling condescending towards the one who has sinned. If we’re more mature we might feel compassionate, sad at the loss that this person will experience and the hard work that lies ahead. But Paul tells us to go beyond our feelings, our initial reactions and to take two actions. First, he tells us to help to bring the person back, to restore him, to support her, to gently and humbly help the person get back on the right path.

That sounds pretty easy -- “Hey, you’re off track; here’s what you should be doing, so good luck with that!” How often does that help? No, “gently and humbly” suggests that we come alongside, urge the person to make a better choice, even when they disagree strongly with our viewpoint, being careful not to come across as better than they are, but just standing for the good that you believe for for their lives. “I just can’t stand to see you lose the blessings that you’ve known. I just wouldn’t feel like a true friend if I watched you go down this road and didn’t try to help you in some way, in any way I could. What can I do for you?”

The second thing Paul tells us to do when dealing with someone who has fallen in some way, is to watch ourselves, to be careful that we don’t fall into the same temptation. Now, if we had really come to our fallen friend with humility, we would have already been aware that we could fall in exactly the same way that our friend had. We wouldn’t have come in a self-assured way, but admitting that, “there, but for the grace of God, go I”. So humility is key, but there’s another side to this warning.

We have to be aware that, as Christians, we have a spiritual enemy who wants to destroy us. This is taught on page after page of Scripture. There is a devil; there is an evil one who is called the ruler of this world. If we don’t take his agenda seriously, then we will be easy prey for his schemes. In this context, that might mean that while we try to counsel or encourage someone who’s in a bad space in their lives, the enemy might be telling us, “See, it’s not so bad to sin. You would still be cared for, probably get more attention than you’re getting now, and nobody is going to start hating you for doing something that everyone does.”

When we look at the story of the first temptation, where the first man and woman were confronted by the devil, we see his approach. He didn’t declare himself as the enemy of God, nor did he accuse God of not having their best interests at heart. He just questioned what they understood that God had said, just put seeds of doubt in their minds, just got them to think about a different result from their disobedience than the one God had warned them of. God had said, “You will surely die,” and the devil said, “You’ll become like God, knowing good and evil.” God was right -- death became part of the human reality. The devil was partly right -- humans came to know evil (they

already knew good) and so expanded their base of knowledge; their experience of life became bigger.

That's how it works with temptation -- you get a glimpse of something that sounds like it might be a benefit to you, but the reality is not so wonderful. Through the first sin we became mortal and gained an understanding of evil; through other sins we lose self-respect, confidence in our salvation, the desire to press on to know the Lord. And beyond that, we lose friends, maybe health, maybe our source of income, maybe our standing in the community. It can seem okay, seem like it won't cause any damage, but we have to look beyond that to what God says about sin and its consequences. In our passage today, Paul says, "Look to yourself; be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself."

The second big area where Paul encourages us to look at ourselves in a different way comes in verse three:

"If you think you are too important to help someone in need, you are only fooling yourself. You are really a nobody."

That's a pretty revealing statement, identifying the church of Jesus Christ as a collection of self-confessed nobodies, of people who think little of themselves and a lot of Jesus Christ.

But this statement, "If you think you are too important to help someone in need", surely doesn't apply. We don't know anyone like that. There's no one in this church who would ever say such a thing. You're right, of course, and so we should just skip over this part of our passage and move on to the next part ... except that it doesn't say, "If you tell others that you are too important to help someone in need, you are only fooling yourself." It says, "if you think you are too important", and who knows what people really think? They don't tell us that they're too important, but only because that wouldn't be received very well. It goes against what we know God desires, a humble heart that regards others as more important than ourselves.

So we'll say we're too busy or too tired or we have an appointment that is too awkward to break, or at least give some reasonable excuse. But are we thinking, "I don't have time for this person, I'm just tired of their long list of problems, I'm not going to put myself out for them when they don't seem to ever put themselves out for me or just about anyone else"?

Yes, there are times when you need to say, "No", when you are close to burning out or losing your compassionate heart through over-caring. There are times when someone else's need can't be your biggest priority. You have a family or a spouse that needs you more and they are the priority in this circumstance. You need your rest, to guard your mental as well as physical health. The point of this text is NOT to say, "Whenever someone asks for help, you need to be there." The point of the passage is to say, "Watch your-self. Make sure that you're not looking down your nose at the person who has a need, not judging or condemning. If you need to say "no", say it because you're not able to help, not because you're not willing to help. That's the

point that Paul is driving home in this section: he doesn't want us to place ourselves above anyone in need. That way, if we have to say "no", it won't be because of pride. Maybe there is no one in this room for whom this would ever be an issue, but Paul is warning us to keep a lookout, to keep watching ourselves so that we don't fall into this kind of temptation.

The third area of watchfulness has to do with taking care of our responsibilities, doing everything that we're supposed to do:

Be sure to do what you should, for then you will enjoy the personal satisfaction of having done your work well, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else. For we are each responsible for our own conduct.

The passage mentions both "work" and "conduct" as the things we do when we are doing what we should, so let's look at those two.

The "work" Paul refers to is a pretty broad term; your life's work, the fruit of all your labour, the outcome of your service or ministry. How would you summarize your own contributions to the Kingdom, to your community or your church? Is it something you feel really good about, joyful, satisfied? Well, good. The point is not that you shouldn't feel happy about what you've done, but that you shouldn't feel happy because you did more than somebody else.

What gifts has God given you? What opportunities were yours alone? What connections came your way that no one else in your circle could claim? What were you given in your upbringing that gave you a head start on the rest of your peers? What advantages have you had that could only be called undeserved blessings? You see, we have no capacity to measure ourselves against others with any degree of accuracy or confidence at all. Every person's circumstances are so unique that the path they put us on must also be unique. This careful self awareness that Paul is advocating has more to do with examining what we have done with the gifts and opportunities that God has given us, rather than whether our lives are somehow better than someone else's.

The second word that is used here to describe what we are individually responsible for is translated in the NLT as "conduct", but elsewhere as "load" or "burden". This is the burden of our own imperfections, the burden of weakness that besets us, every shortcoming and imperfection that we find in ourselves becomes part of the load we bear. The purpose of this self-examination is not spiritual naval-gazing, not becoming introspective and anxious about our failures, but simply taking responsibility for ourselves and not asking others to be responsible for us. To me that suggests that we don't seek to blame others for our faults and failures, nor do we pretend that our issues aren't all that important, nor do we bring up others' failings in order to deflect attention from our own. We are called to help one another, but we don't do that well when we take responsibility for other people's choices, when we want them to be healthy to such a great extent that we can't separate ourselves from their failures. The healthy scenario is when each person takes responsibility for himself or herself.

So, here are the selfies that Paul wants us to take:

1. Be really careful when you're trying to help someone who has fallen into sin, that you don't get snared in the same area. Watch yourself. Is there something that has hooked this person that could hook me, too? Is this an area where my thoughts haven't been godly, where I've been weak in the past, where I could see myself getting sucked in?

Let me give an example that might be helpful. If we are trying to help someone see that they have an issue with anger that needs to be dealt with, then we need to make sure that our own anger issues are dealt with first. If we don't look to ourselves, but just go straight ahead and talk to the person about his problem, her problem, what happens when they react? What happens when they get angry, or when we get frustrated by their lack of response, or unwillingness to change? We lose it, and in the process we lose our credibility and any opportunity to really help the person with their problem.

Paul's not saying, "Don't try to help people if you are weak yourself," but he is telling us to be careful, to be watchful, so that our sinful nature doesn't rise up and use our interactions as an opportunity to ensnare us further.

2. The second selfie has to do with an examination of our tendency to pride. This has a lot to do with the way we think about ourselves. Do we look at the needs of those around us with an, "Oh, well, they deserved it. They made a lot of bad choices and now they're paying for them"? Or do we humbly say, "That could have been me and, if it was, I'd sure like someone to come alongside, someone to offer to help, someone to bring a word of encouragement and hope."

3. The third selfie is about looking back at yourself and your spiritual growth, your life contributions, the burdens you carry and the blessing you bring to others, not so that you can compare yourself with anyone else -- none of us is properly equipped to do that -- but so that you are more self-aware and more focused on fulfilling the purposes that God has for you in life. This is the kind of focus that is needed if we are going to grow spiritually.

If you are self-aware, you'll know the burdens you carry, the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that weigh you down. This has the result of keeping us humble and of helping us to take responsibility for the areas of growth that we should be pursuing.

Self-awareness is a real struggle for some. It seems that it's easier for a lot of us to detect what's going on in another person's life, and even to give advice about it, than for us to recognize where we're struggling and what we need to change. But self-awareness is key to walking in right relationships with one another and in pursuing the things that make for growth in our lives. So, turn the camera back on yourself, focus, take a shot, and then look at it, carefully, and see what God is saying to you.

Can you help people without falling into the same temptations they are caught in?

Are you willing to help people that you have maybe judged in some way or feel superior to?

Do you have a peace about where you're at, not from comparing yourself with others, but from looking closely at what's going on with you?

Smile, here comes the flash!