

CHURCH AND CULTURE

Attitudes toward SelfBy Jerry Truex; June 13, 2010

A. Introduction

Today we continue our four-part series comparing *popular culture* with *the way of Jesus*. In this series, we look at attitudes about God, others, and ourselves. Today we will look at how our culture influences our attitudes about our own ourselves.

I will present the case that our culture fuels our craving for instant gratification, unrestrained pleasure, and destructive power. In this way, our culture promotes the FALSE SELF with its problems and pains.

In contrast, Christ inspires us, and the grace of God enables us, to realize our TRUE SELF—the image of God, Christ-likeness, Christ within us. I believe that when we realize our TRUE SELVES we find lasting joy, happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction, which Christ called “abundant life.”

Jn. 10:10b “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (NRSV)

B. “I want it now! (Instant gratification)

First, our culture values instant gratification. Our culture tells us that we deserve to have our needs met instantly. Explicitly and implicitly, television, advertizing, and the new technologies tell us that we deserve instant gratification.

Though the many conscious and unconscious messages we receive each day, we are conditioned to think we should not wait for anything. We expect quick solutions to every problem and a quick response to our every desire.

1. Evidence

What is the evidence? Quick Trip—the gas station and convenience store—symbolizes our demand for instant gratification. Consider all the “drive through” stores we have—drive through liquor stores, banks, and pharmacies. Lens Crafters is almost a drive through optical solution. We can get instant coffee at Starbucks and instant meals at McDonalds. And, if you can’t wait to see your doctor, you can go to a “doc in the box” at the local mall. Internet provider lure us with higher and higher speed and shorter time for downloads. We have instant communication with cell phones, emails, and text-messaging.

Instant gratification is entrenched in our culture. We live at high speed. We don't want to wait for anything. We want to pack more and more into our lives, not for satisfaction of the soul, but because of greed. Our appetites are unquenchable.

2. The Cost

Speed comes at a cost. By encouraging speed and instant gratification, our culture encourages self-absorption and cravings of every. In this way, it promotes narcissism (self-preoccupation) and addictions. Narcissism mixed with addiction isolates us from each other. It undermines relationships, fragments families, cuts off community.

In a culture that promotes and promises instant gratification, "other" people are seen in two ways. Other people become *objects* to meet our perceived needs or *obstacles* to meeting our perceived needs. Other people become *objects* when we use them to meet our desires—and who cares about their needs. Other people become *obstacles* if they are in our way or don't serve us fast enough—who cares about their needs.

The cost for us—who live in an instant gratification culture—is addiction or attachment. An addiction or attachment is an emotionally backed demand—"I must have what I want and I will not be happy unless I have it." It is a behavior, emotion, substance or anything else a person is not willing or able to give up.

Our culture promotes addictions and attachments by making us believe we must have instant satisfaction, security, or comfort. We become preoccupied with food, shelter, entertainment, pleasure, comfort, anything else to which we think we are entitled to feel secure in life.

When we don't get what we want—what we think we must have to be happy—we experience frustration, anxiety, anger, and even fear. Our consciousness is dominated by trying to get "enough"—the problem is we will never get enough. So long as we are addicted to instant gratification, we will never attain inner harmony or peace—a right relationship with our own self.

C. "If it feels good, it is" (Pleasure)

Second, our culture places a superior value on pleasure. Our culture tells us that we will find "the meaning of life" in food, sports, entertainment, travel, sex, and drugs. Though advertisement, peer influence, and other means, we are pushed to embrace the idea that we deserve pleasure. It is an inalienable right. So the pursuit of pleasure becomes an ethical principle, which is hedonism.

1. Evidence

The money Americans spend on food and film, sports and recreational drugs, vacations and electronic games, toys and household comforts is staggering. For example, the 2009 film,

Avatar, brought in over \$1 billion dollars in the first seventeen days¹ and, to date, the worldwide take is \$2.7 billion.²

Pleasure is big business. Seven of the top twelve most lucrative business markets in the world focus on pleasure:³

1. Global Oil: \$2.5 trillion
2. Global Defense: \$1.14 trillion in 2007
3. US Movie & TV Entertainment: \$726 billion
4. Global pharmaceuticals: \$700 billion
5. US Sports: \$425 billion
6. US Gambling: \$380 billion
7. Global Illegal drugs: \$300 billion
8. World's five biggest alcohol companies: \$277 billion
9. Global Banking: \$115 billion
10. Global Prostitution: \$108 billion
11. Global pornography: \$97 billion
12. Global human trafficking: \$32 billion

Pleasure has its rewards. It produces emotional highs. It counterbalances the pain and stress we feel. It has physical benefits. It helps relax the body and fight diseases. It helps us escape temporarily and gives us an incentive to work.

2. Costs

But there are costs. Unrestrained pleasure seeking when combined with our cultural values of competition, individualism, and selfishness creates self-destructive behaviors and addictions.

For example, the rapid spread of HIV/AIDs is largely the result of unrestrained hedonism. Infected people often transmit the virus due to their compulsion to satisfy their own desires without regard for others who become infected.

Or again, substance abuse—alcohol, drugs, food—are characteristic of our society. Such addictions harm the body, undermine motivation, and impair a person's ability to work, survive, and maintain relationships.

The problem is not pleasure *per se*; rather, it is the addiction or attachment to pleasure that robs us of our freedom and thereby leads us to self-destructive behaviors.

Ironically, compulsive pleasure seeking undermines lasting satisfaction and joy. When we don't get the pleasures what we want—what we think we must have to be happy—we experience frustration, anxiety, anger, and boredom. Constant pleasure seeking, which our culture pushes us toward, undermines our inner balance and equanimity (clam)—a right relationship with our own self. It subverts and sabotages any effort to attain lasting happiness.

¹ *Screenrant*; <http://screenrant.com/avatar-is-an-epic-success-rob-39881>.

² *The Numbers*; <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/records/budgets.php>

³ *Business Pundit*; <http://www.businesspundit.com/the-worlds-most-lucrative-business-markets>.

D. "If it can take it, it's mine" (Power)

Third, our culture values coercive power. This is the power *to make others bend to your will*. Don't get me wrong. Power is important. Without power we could not get up in the morning, work for a living, write a book, or do other great things. What I'm talking about is "coercive power"; the power to "physically control" or "manipulate" other people.

1. Evidence

Our military and our movies provide examples of coercive power. If the US wants control in the Middle East, in go the troops. If Rambo wants to free missing POWs, he brings an arsenal of weapons and imposes his will. Movies and television shows constantly present images of coercive power.

We are encouraged to exercise coercive power by the things we say and hear. You've heard such phrases such "the survival of the fittest"; "looking out for #1"; "taking control of your life"; "knowledge is power." All of these phrases play into our instinctive craving to get what we want by physical force or manipulative force.

To get our way, we often use whatever power is available. Some use their position, voice, and physical strength. Others us their attractiveness, charm, or words.

The successful use of coercive power seems to have a payoff. It seems to allow us to ignore the needs of others. It seems to advance our own prestige and attain even more power.

2. Costs

The pursuit of power can lead us into battles. Marriages become a struggle for who gets their way. Relationships are destroyed as warring parties push each other to meet their own needs without fully considering the needs of the other. When we control others, we usurp their will. That often produces retaliation, which sets of a vicious cycle of violence with all the paranoia and blowback of international terrorism.

Such use of power undermines cooperative relationships which we all need. When we act in the best interests of others, they often, in turn, act in ways that benefit us.

E. Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth is the antidote to a cultural that promotes instant gratification and self-absorption. Spiritual growth involves a movement from the "false self" with its addictions/attachments to the "true self" with its unattached unconditional love. It is *relinquishing the narcissistic ego*, which separates us from other people, and *realizing the image of God*, which unites us with others.

[For the remainder of the sermon, follow the power point below.]

What is Spiritual Growth?

By Pastor Jerry Truex

Spiritual growth is a process

And realizing your TRUE SELF.

Of relinquishing your FALSE SELF

The False Self in Biblical Perspective

Gal. 5:19-21. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. (NRSV)

Col. 3:5-6, 8-9. ⁵ Put to death ... whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)... ⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices. (NRSV)

Eph. 4: 18-19, 22-23. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity... ²² You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to be clothed yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (NRSV)

The False Self System

I am what I do (Profession)

I am what I have (Possessions)

I am what others think about me (Prestige)

Power Attachments (Self-Promotion)

Sensation Attachments (Self-Gratification)

Security Attachments (Self-Protection)

Conditional love & Conditional acceptance

The True Self in Biblical Perspective

Rom. 8:15-16. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (NRSV)

Gal. 5:16, 22-23. ¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh... ²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. (NRSV)

Eph. 3:16-17, 19. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love... so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (NRSV)

2 Pet. 1:3-4. ³ His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness... ⁴... so that... you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature [*gēnēthē theias koinōnoi physēs*]. (NRSV)

Col. 3:4, 10. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory... ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. (NRSV)

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Spiritual Disciplines

1. Prayer
2. Fasting
3. Bible Study
4. Lectio Divina
5. Scripture Meditation
6. Examen of Consciousness
7. Centering Prayer
8. Meditation
9. Rule of Christ
10. Hospitality
11. Peacemaking
12. Many others

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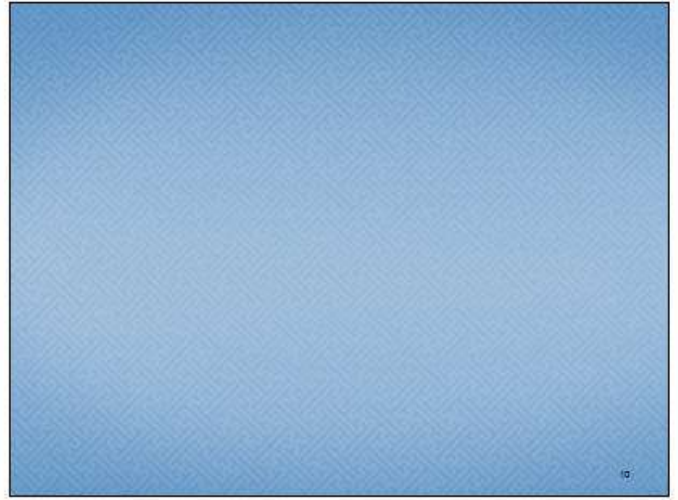
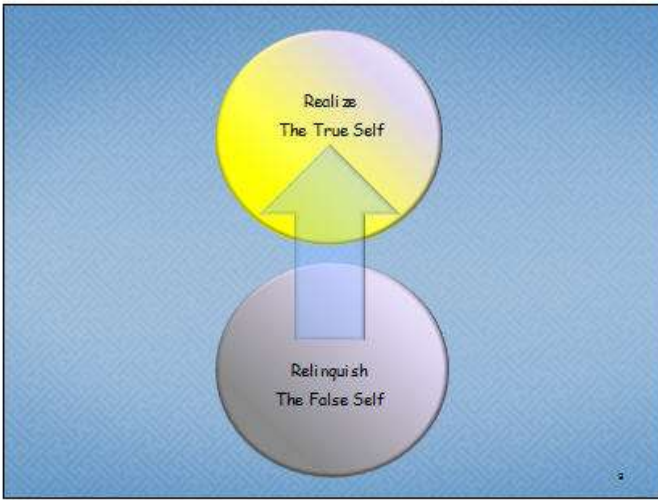
Three Stages of Growth

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Jesus said:

"For those who want to save their life (False Self) will lose it (True Self), and those who lose their life (False Self) for my sake will save it (True Self)."
 - Luke 9:24

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F. Summary

Our culture feeds the “false self” (self-centered, narcissistic self) with its cravings. The constant craving of the “false self” makes us miserable and separates us from others. When cravings cannot be satisfied—and they never can be fully satisfied—we experience negative emotions, anger when we cannot control others or our environment (power attachment), frustration and anxiety when we cannot satisfy our desires for sensations (pleasure attachment), and shame and guilt when we cannot meet what we think are society’s expectations (prestige attachment).

The antidote to the “false self” system is spiritual growth. Spiritual growth involves the development of non-attachment, freedom from craving and thus freedom from negative emotions. Spiritual disciplines enable us to overcome attachments. Living in a non-attached way allows our “true self” (other-centered, divine life) to emerge. This empowers us to realize the image of God and love others truly.

Reflections and Discussion