

Self-Renunciation and Self-Aggrandizement

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of self-renunciation and the dangers of self-aggrandizement, highlighting the destructive nature of selfishness and the need for humility and service.

Scripture: Judges 8:22, Galatians 2:20, Galatians 5:15

Topics: "Self-Renunciation", "Self-Aggrandizement"

Description

A.B. Simpson's sermon 'Self-Renunciation and Self-Aggrandizement' emphasizes the contrast between self-renunciation, exemplified by Gideon, and self-aggrandizement, represented by his son Abimelech. Simpson illustrates how true greatness in the Christian life comes from serving others rather than seeking personal glory, warning against the dangers of pride and ambition that can corrupt even noble endeavors. He draws parallels between the destructive nature of selfishness and the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, urging believers to embrace a life of selfless love and service. The sermon concludes with a call to allow Christ to live through us, transforming our lives from self-centeredness to selflessness.

Transcript

"Not I, but Christ that liveth in me." Gal. 2: 20.

"But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another." Gal. 5: 15.

"Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also. And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you." Judges 8: 22, 23.

"The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them," etc. Judges 9: 8-15.

These various passages constitute a composite picture representing with peculiar vividness the nature and malignity of self.

I. Self-Renunciation. It stands out finely in the last chapter of Gideon's life. After fairly winning and deserving as the world goes, the honor of a crown, he had the grace and the humility to refuse it; and so his life stand's out consistent to the close. It began in nothingness and ended in self-abnegation. Many a beautiful life commences gloriously, and when God has blessed it, it gathers to itself the honor and glory of His blessing and ends in self-consciousness and fleshly pride. Saul commenced in apparent modesty, hiding under the stuff, but Saul ended a king of pride and the monument of humiliating failure and

irretrievable ruin. This is often true of some noble Christian enterprise which is blessed in the days of its weakness and dependence upon God, but when it becomes strong and successful it is apt to rise into self-sufficiency and end in worldly conformity and the curse of selfishness. This has been the bane of Christianity in every age. Peter crucified with downward head became Peter the Pope and Prince of Christendom. And Prelacy has followed Papacy as far as it dared, and now ecclesiastical pride in a thousand new forms threatens the purity and simplicity of the Church of Christ with the same peril. A republican form of government does not save a people from the kingship of human selfishness. The spirit of social preeminence, political bossism and personal ambition runs through all our institutions and social life, and the Church has lost her power because the disciples are still disputing who should be the greatest. Christ's answer is forever unequivocal and plain, "He that will be great among you, let him be your servant, and he that will be chief let him be your slave." There is no more necessary thing today than to guard the Church of God against the preeminence of men. No wise Christian worker will want to throw the shadow of his own personality too strongly across his work or become necessary himself to the success of his cause. God wants no Popes, whether they be on Caesar's throne, in St. Peter's Palace, Episcopal Sees, Salvation Army Dictators or Christian Alliance leaders. Let the secret of our strength be the simple apostolic rule, "One is your Master and ye are all brethren," "In honor preferring one another."

2. Self-Aggrandizement. If we see self-renunciation in Gideon we soon find the opposite in his son. The story of Abimelech and the parable of Jotham, which crystallizes its lessons, stand out forever as the portrait of self in the most subtle and destructive forms. Abimelech was the illegitimate son of Gideon, born of a Shechemite mother. He seems to have been ostracized in some measure from the family and lived at Shechem with his mother's relatives, while the other seventy sons of Gideon dwelt at Ophrah, their father's home. After Gideon's death the spirit of selfish ambition seized Abimelech, and, playing on the clannish jealousies of his brethren, the Shechemites, he persuaded them to join him in a revolutionary movement, setting himself up as king. He took the devil into partnership with him by going into the idolatrous temple of Baal Berith, and taking out of the treasury the money with which he hired a set of worthless fellows as the nucleus of his army. With these he made a sudden descent upon his father's home, and murdered all his brethren except Jotham, his youngest brother, who succeeded in escaping. Then he had himself proclaimed king, and assembled all the people in the valley of Shechem for the public coronation. There, in the historic Vale of Ebal and Gerizim, with glorious pageantry the coronation ceremonies were opened, when, suddenly, Jotham from an overhanging crag about eight hundred feet above the valley, appeared in view and uttered the striking parable of the "Bramble King," startling the crowd and the king with his sudden apparition and his strange and sarcastic message which all could not fail to understand, and then as suddenly disappearing into the mountain recesses.

Jotham's parable was at once a portrait and a parable. It held up in words of burning scorn the meanness and the fleshliness of selfishness, and at the same time it told in unmistakable language the sequences that were sure to follow.

And surely they did follow in Abimelech's career, for after three years of apparent quietness and some show of well doing, the curse began to unfold and the prophecy to be fulfilled. Abimelech and his Shechemite friends became estranged and more and more obnoxious to each other, and treachery met treachery, and hate met hate, until it culminated in a revolution against Abimelech by the men of Shechem. This was followed by warfare until the Shechemites were murdered by thousands, their city razed to the ground and sown with salt, and the last remnant of the citizens burned up in a horrible holocaust of cruelty, with the ruins of their stronghold. Abimelech presses on against his enemies ravaging

with fire and sword until at last he brings his foes to bay in the stronghold of Thebez, where, at last, a rock hurled from the battlements by a loyal woman crushes Abimelech's skull, and ends his destructive life with the violence which he had himself visited upon so many others. Truly fire had come out from the bramble of Abimelech to consume the men of Shechem and at last the fire consumed Abimelech himself.

The lessons of this story are rich, varied and most vivid.

1. We see the origin of self-aggrandizement. It is born of the flesh, even as Abimelech was born of the strange woman of Shechem. Self in all its forms, however subtle and disguised, is the fruit of the carnal nature, and it is the very root and center of the life and sin. It is no use to attempt to cut off our sinful acts, habits or propensities until we strike the very heart of evil, our self-life, where the little "I" is exalted and made king, and everything made tributary to our own will, pleasure or honor.

2. Self lives on the selfishness of others, and uses the same principle in them for the gratification of its ends. Abimelech appealed to the men of Shechem by ties of race and blood, and by the inducements of their own self-interest. And so self-aggrandizement becomes a web of countless coils woven and interwoven with the selfishness of others, until hand joins in hand, and a thousand chords of mutual self-interest bind together political parties, commercial monopolies, criminal confederacies, and the baneful associations of evil men which so largely constitute human society. Each is bound to the other by his own selfishness, and the man who knows best how to play with the selfish passions of others makes them all tributary to his own needs, while the devil sits supreme as king over all. When you see a man appealing to the selfishness of others you may be very sure that he is selfishness incarnate.

3. We see self in partnership with Satan. Abimelech goes to the house of idols and gets the means for his unholy war from the temple of Baal. The devil is always ready to advance the funds to carry out any scheme of human selfishness. He is a very liberal investor in selfish trusts and sinful monopolies. You can always get money for a political campaign and a whiskey trust even when missionary societies are threatened with bankruptcy. Millions and millions of dollars are being thrown away every day in Satan's investments and sin's cooperative societies, and the cause of Christ is languishing by reason of the selfishness of its followers. The devil has his providences as well as the Lord, and the man who wants to plunge into the depths of Satan will find plenty of capital waiting his call and wonder often at his own success.

The devil not only provides the means, but also the men. And so Abimelech soon finds a lot of rascals ready to follow him and do his bidding. Alas, there are plenty of such men still to be found! They swarm on every side waiting for employment. They are recruiting by thousands; and a hundred to one they are to be found at every corner, as compared with the volunteers we seek for Christ. They are the peril of modern society, and some day they will rise in myriad swarms like the Vandals who swallowed up old Rome, and in the dark tribulation days will capture this world for Satan. Selfishness is ever ready to use them as its minions, and things that some men would not do themselves they are willing to let these sons of Belial do. There are many that sit in the high places with kid-gloved hands and polished manners who never perhaps shed a drop of human blood, nor soiled their feet and hands with the grosser forms of crime; but they are murderers and criminals all the same, and they do not hesitate to use the basest tools to carry out their purpose; and some day they shall, stand red-handed and pale with agony as David in the hour when God proved him guilty of another's crime.

5. Next we see self unmasking itself and sinking to the depths of cruelty to accomplish its purpose. Abimelech never stops until his hands are imbued in the blood of his own brothers, and sixty-nine of his own father's children, boys that played with him in childhood have been butchered on the very stone where the angel half a century before had accepted Gideon's offering. Perhaps Abimelech had no idea, when he began, of being a fratricide; but he was, all the same. When a burglar enters the house of his victim his direct object is not to murder, but he is armed for the worst, and if murder is necessary to accomplish his design or protect himself he is not going to shirk it; and so, when we start out upon the pathway of selfishness and sin, only the mercy of God can keep us back from the utmost extremity of evil and iniquity. Well may we all thank God that we have not been left to go farther than we have.

6. Next, we see the foolishness and short-sightedness of selfishness. How vividly Jotham brings all this out in his exquisite parable of the Bramble King! The Olive Tree did not want to be a king because it would cost much to leave the fatness of its fruit and the richness of its soil for the empty honor of waving over the other trees. The Fig Tree had no desire for a glory that would rob it of its sweetness. The Vine was too sensible to sacrifice its luscious grapes and its reviving wine, which even God appreciated, and which was a blessing to man, for the sake of a brief preeminence over other trees. The only shrub that could be found willing even to consider the proposition of royal honors was a little thorny bramble, which had no fruit to sacrifice, no blossoms to lose, and no real business in life but to be a nuisance and torment to others. And so the Bramble enters into negotiations with the trees with a view to its coronation as their king. It expresses a little courteous surprise and scepticism about their sincerity in appealing to it, and almost suggests that they would not have come if they could have gone anywhere else, and then adds, with a touch of sarcasm: "If, in truth, you anoint me king over you then come and put your trust in my shadow." The bramble means business. If it is to be a king it insists on the complete subjection of all the other trees under its thorny sceptre. If a bramble could smile, this one must have smiled at the mention of its own "shadow." And then it adds with a deeper touch of sincerity: "And if not," now it is really speaking out its honest thought and intention, "let fire go out from the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon."

But now to return to our point. We see how little attraction supremacy had for the olive, the fig tree and the vine. They had something better to do than to rule over others. They had a mission of beneficence, sweetness and service; and a man anointed with the Holy Ghost, and fed on the sweetness of Christ and bearing fruit for God and man, is not craving after self-aggrandizement. Empty glory can never fill the human heart; vanity and pride are no substitutes for the joy of the Lord, the fulness of the Spirit and the sweet rest we find at Jesus' feet. A life of holy service for others is much more delightful than receiving and seeking their honor.

Let us not be so foolish as to waste our lives in such pursuits as the bramble. The society queen is earning a broken heart. The ambitious political leader is laying up for himself the disappointments of a baffled ambition, and perhaps the curse of an evil conscience and an avenging God. God made us for Himself and for the ministry of love. Let us give no place to that wretched self which is but a sapling out of Satan's root. A bramble by nature, it has been a curse to us as it will be to everybody else.

7. We see the evil fruition of self as it works out in the destiny of others and then reacts in our own destruction. Abimelech's life is the historical fulfillment of Jotham's parable. For a little while the bramble king seemed like an olive or a fig tree. His thorns are not yet fully grown. For three years Abimelech seemed to do fairly well. So self hides its sting for a while, and under its nice manners and winning smile it almost looks like an angel; but when the test comes the sheathed claws appear, and the slumbering serpent awakes with its envenomed sting. The men of Shechem had harbored a serpent in their bosom

who was going to sting their lives to death. What an awful picture of treachery and destructiveness! Abimelech oppresses the Shechemites, and the Shechemites attempt to dethrone Abimelech, in turn to be themselves consumed and destroyed by his vengeance, until he at last is destroyed in the final turn of the wheels of retribution.

How true are the apostle's words, "If ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another." A selfish spirit is a torment to everybody, and at last the greatest curse to itself. Like the scorpion, it spends its life in stinging others, and then, at last it gathers up itself and with one final effort stings itself to death. So many a woman has destroyed the honor and purity of others, and then has hurled herself into the dark abyss. So many a man has gone on corrupting innocence with his heartless selfishness, and then become himself the avenger of his crimes.

It is not possible for selfishness to make anybody else happy, and it is still less possible for it to make its possessor happy. It is a bramble by nature, and its only end must be the crackling thorns and the consuming flame. Old Aesop gave its true character in his instructive fable of a fox, who, falling down a precipice, clung to a bramble to break his fall, and found that the bramble had torn him worse than the fall. He turned to it in anger and disappointment and reproached it for its deceitful cruelty, and the bramble honestly replied, "How can anybody expect to catch hold of me, when the business of my life is to catch hold of others?"

Oh, may God open our eyes to see the curses of selfishness! If there is one thing in us that seeks for honor and glory it is a bramble, and it can only bring us misery and the flames of judgment. Let us repudiate it and follow the life of holy beneficence, and find our rich reward in the sweet, divine joy of holy usefulness.

How shall we be saved from the curse of selfishness? Let us gaze on two pictures:

Let us look back at Eden's gate and see the bramble. Alas, it is the symbol of our curse; it is the fruit of sin; it is the first outcome of man's sad fall. "Thorns and thistles shall the earth bring forth to thee until thou return to dust from whence thou wast taken." And so the bramble stands as a representation of man's sin and God's curse. Shall we make it our king? Shall we join hands with Satan, whose own fall began with selfishness and pride? Oh, shall we not rather turn our back upon it for the Tree of Life in the midst of the Paradise of God?

Then let us take another look and gaze on Calvary. What is this that lacerates our Savior's brow and wreathes His gentle face with such a rude, tormenting crown? Ah! it is the old bramble again; it is the crown of thorns. What are those drops of blood that stain His face, and the tears that mingle with them and flow down His cheeks? Ah! they are the brambles of my selfishness; they are the thorns of my pride. It was this selfish "I" that I let not only crush my fellows, but even murder my Lord. It was not only for our sins He died, but it was for our selfishness, and in that death we die.

Ah! that is the secret of victory over self. "We thus judge that if One died for all, then all died. He died for all, that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto Him that died for them and rose again."

Then I turn the picture round, and yet I see the vision of Hope in that thorny crown of His. I see the thorns and brambles of my selfishness fastened to His Cross, and I know that I, as well as my sin, am dead indeed. The man that was, is now no more. I have nailed him to the cross with my Lord. There he hangs

upon the bowed head of my Redeemer. I am a new man born out of heaven, united with the risen Christ; no longer I, but Christ that liveth in me. And now, like Christ, my place is to live the life of self-renouncing love, and win the highest place by forgetting all about place and seeking only to serve and bless. Blessed Master, help us thus to cease to be, and let Thee be in us instead of us, so that it shall be truly, "No more I, but Christ who liveth in me."

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