

## **Introduction**

Today, I'm going to preach what I call a **"Doormat Theology."** Probably most of you have told someone or been told by someone, **"Don't be a doormat!"** But in this sermon, I'm going to tell you the opposite of that. As Paul defines it in Philippians 2:3-8, **"Be a doormat!"**

One of the defining aspects of our lives is our relationships with others. Our lives are a social endeavor whether we like it or not. Which is why Philippians 2:3-8 speak so powerfully to us. In this text, Paul gives us two guidelines to direct our interactions with others, both of which I want to identify and explain.

## **Regard**

The first guideline is about how we **"regard"** people. That's the word Paul uses in verse 3, **"regard."** Notice that he links it with the word **"mind"** in the same verse, and appropriately so. It refers to how we think about or perceive others in relation to us. The word **"important"** in verse 3 gives us the reference point for that. Who do we think is more important? Is it others or us?

Now, if we were human beings in our natural state (apart from Jesus), we would answer, if we were honest, **"us."** The Bible teaches that all of us are born with a sinful nature that touches and taints every aspect of our persons and lives. It also teaches that the essence of that nature is self-absorption. We take ourselves in thought and practice as God. We think and act as if we're the center of the universe around which everyone and everything else revolves. That necessarily implies that we're more important than everyone else is and that's in fact what we think. We perceive ourselves as possessing greater value or worth than everyone else, including the ones we love.

We'd never admit that of course but the things we feel and do clearly reveal it. Carl Sovine defeated me in the championship game of the Ashland Seminary Ping Pong Tournament years ago. I was upset for

two weeks afterwards that he did. Why? It's because I was far more concerned that I succeed than that he succeed. I regarded me as more important than he.

Examine how people, including us, feel and act when others obstruct their will, outshine them, disagree with them, criticize them, and much more. We'll grasp it if we do. Human beings in their natural state regard themselves as more important than others.

But notice, in sharp contrast, what Paul commands in verse 3, "**but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.**" People's value derives from their identity as ones whom God loves. Since He loves all people equally, we're all equally valuable. That's the objective reality. But subjectively, in our minds, we should think of it this way. Others are more important than we are. They aren't but for the purpose of directing our interactions with them, we should perceive them to be.

So, I think that my opponent that I'm playing against is more important than I am; or that the driver who wants the same parking space as I do is more important than I am; or that the co-worker who slanders me is more important than I am; or that the waitress who gets my order wrong is more important than I am; or that my spouse who opposes my will is more important than I am, and so on. You get my point. We should regard others as being more important than we are.

## **Do**

The second guideline Paul gives us is about what we "**do**" to people. That's the word he uses in verse 3, "**do,**" and it's instructive. We're doing things to people in our interactions with them whether we realize it or not. I overheard a mother ask one son about another son who was crying, "**What did you do to him?**" We can ask ourselves the same question about the people in our lives. What are we doing to them?

What we think determines the answer to that. It's a fundamental principle that what we think directs what we do and that's the case here.

When we think that we're more important than others are, we **"do"** to them with **"selfishness"** and **"empty conceit"**, to quote verse 3. Social critic Nicolaus Mills defines more specifically what that means. We're **"hard on others if we think the results will benefit us."** We better ourselves at their expense. Or to say it another way, in our natural state, we're willing to harm others or to allow harm to come to others in order to get what we desire or need. But that's only logical isn't it? Since we think we're more important than they are, it would almost be an injustice if we didn't do that.

Two friends went out to dinner. Both ordered filet of sole and when it came, two pieces of fish, one much bigger than the other, were on the same platter. The first friend picked up the platter and served the second friend, giving him the smaller piece. Irritated, the second friend said, **"You have a lot of nerve."** **"What's the problem?"** the first friend asked. **"You gave me the small piece and kept the big piece for yourself,"** the second friend answered. **"How would you have done it?"** the first friend queried. **"I'd have given the bigger piece to you,"** the second friend replied. **"There's no problem then,"** the first friend declared, **"Because that's exactly what I have."**

That illustrates what we do to people when we think we're more important than they are. We act with selfishness and empty conceit. And that, claims Christian ethicist R.E.O. White, **"lies behind all wrong social relationships described in the Bible."**

He's right, which is one of the reasons Paul commands what he does in verse 3, **"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit."** Never be hard on people just to benefit ourselves. Never get what we desire or need at their expense. That's the negative and it makes way for the positive in verse 4. Paul charges us, **"Look out for the personal interests of others."** Do everything from selflessness and concern, always seeking the benefit and gain of others over our own.

That's our call and it's fairly innocuous – until we flesh it out. In his book *Good Game*, Shirl Hoffman writes, **"The Christians duty is to**

**bestow honor on others, seek their advancement, recognize their superiority, and show esteem for their gifts.”** Those are four practical ways of looking out for the personal interests of others. Bestow honor on them. Seek their advancement. Recognize their superiority. And show esteem for their gifts. I'd add to those four. Rejoice when others outshine us. Grieve over their sins. Bear long with their flaws. Submit to their desires and needs. Behave appropriately in their presence. Be thick skinned when they speak and act. Believe the best about them. Listen to them more than speak to them. Don't make them pay for wronging us. And more. Those are the practical ways that looking out for the personal interests of others manifests itself in the real world of our everyday lives.

And they show just how radical verse 4 is? An illustration is worth a thousand words. In the mid-1980's, a Christian named Andrea Jaeger was the second-ranked female tennis player in the world, at the age of 19. But listen to this startling statement she made about winning, **“It was traumatic for me to beat a player and go into the locker room and see her crying or all upset.”** Along those same lines, after one of the biggest wins of her career, she sat in her hotel thinking: **“Everybody thinks I'm great because I won, but what about the person I beat? How's she feeling. I was tormented.”** She was so tormented in fact that she quit tennis and became an Episcopalian nun.

Most people, especially sports fans, would think Jaeger crazy. But she wasn't. She just took seriously the gospel's call to look out for the personal interests of others. She doing so illustrates just how radical that call is – far more than most of us realize.

Which is why so few Christians answer it. Out of every 100 Christians, there are probably only several at most who do two things: (1) know what verses 3-4 actually mean; and (2) try the best they can to live them out. Be one of the several! You've already done the first of those things by listening to this sermon. You know what the verses mean. Now do the second. Try the best you can to live them out.

## Make Jesus Our Example

Paul reveals an essential condition for doing that in verse 5, **“Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus.”**

Emulate Him in other words. Think about and act toward others as He did. Or more simply put, make Him our example. But what is His example? Significant numbers of Christians don't seem to know.

An elder of a church, not one of ours, yelled at a driver who took a parking space he thought was his. When his son asked him why he did that, he replied, **“Jesus doesn't want us to be doormats. Remember when he drove the moneylenders from the temple?”**

That elder, like many Christians, has what I call a **“Don't Be a Doormat Theology”**, and claims to have gotten it from Jesus Himself.

But He didn't. He illustrates instead what 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian H. Richard Niebuhr called **“personifications of abstractions.”** People take an abstraction, a principle or idea they like, and personify it by finding it in Jesus – whether it's really in Him or not. As Niebuhr explained it, they cherry-pick the gospels to find a Jesus that **“always . . . seems to agree with their interests or the needs of the time.”** The consequence then is that **“He is abandoned in favor of an idol called by His name.”**

Listen to what Christians say and you'll realize that Niebuhr is right. Baseball Chapel, Inc. is an international organization that oversees chapel ministries to over 500 professional teams worldwide. It's an influential group that promotes a specific caricature of Jesus – one that the world of sports itself has painted. Several years ago, one of its representatives, said this about Jesus, **“If He were sliding into second base, he would knock the second baseman into left field to break up the double play. He might not** (notice he didn't say “would not”) **throw a spitball but He would play hard within the rules.”** I was a second basemen in college and have two significant scars, one on each leg, put there by runners breaking up double plays. One of those runners, according to Baseball Chapel Inc., might well have been Jesus.

But I'd ask that representative and the elder I mentioned the same question, "**How in the world did you come up with that picture of Jesus?**" I know the answer. It's by cherry-picking verses from the Bible and misinterpreting or misapplying them, like the elder did. The result is an idol that they call "**Jesus.**"

The moral of the story is clear. Jesus is our example and we need to see Him as He really was, not as we desire Him to have been. Don't be a cherry-picker when it comes to the Bible. Examine it objectively and thoroughly and interpret and apply it correctly. See Jesus as He was.

We'll find what Paul did in verses 6-8 if we do. This is one of the most poignant descriptions of how Jesus thought and acted in the Bible. He, the creator and sustainer God of the universe, thought that human beings were more important than He was. Consequently, He "**stooped down,**" as one author says it, and voluntarily became one of them. Imagine that. It'd be like you or I stooping down to become a gnat. But He not only stooped down, He also spent 33 years being a bond-servant to the very ones He created, yielding His desires and needs to theirs on a daily basis. He then climaxed that 33 years of servant hood by suffering the most painful and shameful death ever suffered – for their sake, that they might have abundant life now and eternal life forever.

I have a question. Does that sound like a person who would yell at someone for taking a parking space He wanted or who would knock the second baseman into left field? Absolutely not! Jesus is our example and the example He gave us was this. Regard others as more important than we are and look out for their interests over our own.

## **Conclusion**

You and I live in a culture of self-assertion. It laughs at what I've preached today and thinks it absurd. It incessantly tells us, "**Don't be a doormat!**" I don't know about you, but I couldn't care less what our culture thinks and tells us. I only care what God tells us, which is this. As Paul defines it in Philippians 2:3-8, "**Be a doormat!**"