



Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs

(7) Expressive Individualism

Genesis 2:15-17
Matthew 16:24-28

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This is sermon # 7 in the series of sermons called “Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs” and our subject today is “Expressive Individualism.” No doubt you have heard the term “individualism” many times. I know that I mention it from time to time in my sermons. It is a very important subject. It is one of the leading themes in our secular society. In one sense, it is nothing new. It has been with us since Adam and Eve fell into sin. But it is new in the sense that it is the conscious guiding principle of an entire society and the implications of it have been worked out more thoroughly than they ever have before. The term “expressive individualism” is a relatively recent term which makes explicit the conviction of many that the way to the fullness of life is to express your individuality. From this philosophy of life come expressions like, “be yourself,” “find yourself”, “be true to yourself” and “follow your heart.” This is the theme of countless movies and novels.

Here is a definition of expressive individualism from Yurval Levin in his book *The Fractured Republic*. “The term suggests not only a desire to pursue one’s own path but also a yearning for fulfillment through the definition and articulation of one’s own identity. It is a drive both to be more like whatever you already are and also to live in society by fully asserting who you are.”

Mark Sayers also discusses this subject in his book *Disappearing Church* although he uses a little different vocabulary. He writes that “we have failed to notice that a new power [has] seized control of both our imaginations and the halls of power. This new power swirls around a

small yet widely held set of beliefs: [Here are the most relevant ones for our discussion] 1. The highest good is individual freedom, happiness, self- definition, and self-expression. 2. Traditions, religions, received wisdom, regulations and social ties that restrict freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression must be reshaped, deconstructed, or destroyed.” (p. 16)

Let me unpack those definitions. The focus is on the individual. What is seen as most important is the freedom and happiness of the individual. In the nature of things this means that the happiness of each individual is more important than the wellbeing of the group. This is not to say that everyone lives this way 100 percent. There are still people out there who are not entirely selfish, but the happiness of the individual is a very high priority and in many instances there is little interest in restricting one’s self for the wellbeing of others or for something other than yourself. This is why so many marriages break down and break up. If someone finds that their spouse is no longer making them happy, then it is time to find another one who will make them happy.

A key part of this mentality is freedom from outside restrictions on the individual. So things like traditions that restrict individual freedom are rejected. Religions are rejected because they restrict individual freedom with their rules and regulations. And social ties are often ignored or treated lightly because they tie people down. Social obligations are disregarded because they restrict the freedom of the individual to find happiness and fulfillment by following their own desires.

The word “self-definition” is also an important part of the philosophy of expressive individualism. Everyone is seen to be free to define themselves. The language of self-discovery is part of this. One of the tasks of life is to find yourself – to discover who you are or to decide for yourself what kind of person you want to be.

Now within the Christian worldview there is a place for learning about yourself – learning what your strengths and weaknesses are – discovering what your interests are and the like. The difference between this an expressive individualism is that the Christians exploration of his/herself takes place in the context of the biblical

definition of the human being and God's purpose for human life. There is none of that in expressive individualism.

Self-definition in expressive individualism is not influenced by any external controls or authorities. As we are seeing in our culture, as the logic of this philosophy of life is worked out, some people no longer allow even their biology to restrict their self-definition. If a person with a male body feels that he is a girl, that feeling -that inner sense of self -trumps everything else, even his male body. And our society has accepted this as a legitimate and even an encouraged way of defining one's self so that the rest of us are now required to accept that person's self-definition and treat them accordingly even to the point of being required to use the pronouns that the transsexual prefers.

But there is more to this idea of self-definition than the extreme examples of transsexuals. This is a philosophy of life for vast numbers of people, perhaps most people in our society. You define who you want to be. You can be whatever you want to be. You find yourself. You follow your own heart. The point of this is that you are not required to fit into an identity that comes from outside of you. In the past many parts of our sense of self were given to us. We are born into a certain family, of a certain sex, of a certain religion, of a certain socio-economic class and so on. And people more or less conformed to these givens about their lives.

These external factors have not disappeared entirely, but they are much less of a determining factor than they used to be, and the philosophy of expressive individualism is about the freedom to choose for yourself, as much as possible, your sense of self or your personal identity. For some people the family that they were born into or marry into may be an important part of their self-concept, but if you choose for it not to be, that is your right, and so your family connections can have little influence on how you think of yourself.

And then the way to fullness of life and fulfillment and happiness is self-expression. The understanding of human nature that underlies this is the idea that human beings are fulfilled by defining themselves and then living out of that self-definition. If you think of yourself as a party animal then you express your individuality as a party animal. If you think

of yourself as a hardworking successful business man then you live out that identity. If you think of yourself as a family oriented person, then you live out that self-concept. But if you think of yourself as a wanderer then off you go and live your life in different places with minimal family connections and obligations. And one key expression of self-expression is sexuality. It is almost inconceivable that one can be a fulfilled human being without being sexually active, according to expressive individualism.

You must be true to yourself. You must be authentic. You must follow your heart. And other people must get out of your way and affirm whomever you decide to be. The individual is the sovereign of his life – the master of his fate and the captain of his soul. And the great sin against expressive individualism is to suggest that we should live a certain way, that we should conform to certain norms and expectations and that we should submit to ideas external to ourselves about who we should be and how we should live.

Now not every aspect of expressive individualism is wrong from a Christian perspective. As a whole it is rebellion against God, but some of the ideas, carefully qualified, are consistent with biblical teaching. Carefully expressed and related to other biblical truths, there is a place for individual freedom, for individual self-expression and for having a unique self-identity that we discover and live out of. As we will see in a moment, there are many things about our lives and purpose that come to us from God both in his word and in his providence and a huge part of the good life is lived by conforming to expectations from God and from other people. The Bible utterly rejects the idea that life is all about the individual and expressing our own individuality. But there is a legitimate place within biblical parameters for individual choices and the expressing of our individuality.

This is rooted in the biblical doctrine of creation of human beings in the image of God and in the observation that God has made every person unique and precious in his or her uniqueness. Furthermore God has made us with both the freedom and responsibility to make choices and it is clear that a huge part of the richness of life is related to our freedom and the legitimate place for making choices in all kinds of

areas. This is not taught in a specific text, but it is implied in the whole biblical message and in the way that God has created human beings in his image. The Bible does celebrate freedom properly understood. Jesus, for instance, tells us in John 8:32-36 that “the truth will set you free” and “[I]f the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” The Bible is largely about calling us to make good choices and teaching us how to make the kind of choices that lead to fullness of life. Furthermore the Bible celebrates our individuality in its teaching on the diversity of spiritual gifts and value it places on each human being.

So the Bible does not squash our individuality and our individual freedom. But the way of understanding these things is profoundly different from the way of the expressive individualism of our culture. Expressive individualism is man-centered. Individual happiness and self-expression are seen as the greatest good. According to the Bible, the glory of God is the most important thing and human beings exist to serve, worship and glorify God. Human happiness is important to God, but only as that happiness is rooted in us serving our primary purpose which is the glorify God. Seeking happiness apart from a relationship with God is actually an expression of rebellion against God. And the Bible insists that happiness apart from God is superficial, temporary and ultimately unsatisfying and hollow.

Let’s look at how the Bible teaches these things. The basic claim of the Bible is that God is God and human beings are created by God and subject to God and accountable to God. We are not free in the way that expressive individualism insists on freedom. Freedom is a term that can be used in all kinds of different ways and so we need to explain how we are using it and especially what the Bible means by it. People who live according to the philosophy of expressive individualism insist that they are free from any authority outside of themselves except the authority of the state. The Bible insists that we are not free in that way. We are not free from God’s authority. God made that clear right from the beginning when he commanded Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Listen to the way that this is expressed in Genesis 2:15-17, ¹⁵“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.””

Right from the beginning God clarified the nature of the relationship between himself and the human race. He created and then he commanded. He made it clear right from the beginning that the freedom of choice that God had built into man was not a total freedom. Right from the beginning God gave commands and mankind were required to obey those commands. This is a basic part of the biblical worldview. The human race is under the authority of God. God sets the parameters and we are required to obey God’s commands. And the penalty for not doing so is death. This is a fundamental part of the nature of things as the Bible describes it. And it underlies all the rest of what the Bible teaches.

Now notice next how Adam and Eve were the first expressive individualists. They decided, as all expressive individualist do, to reject any authority over them and so they did what God had told them not to do. God had told them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and they decided that they would be happier if they ate of that tree and so they did. They decided that they would be better off if they followed their own hearts instead of God’s commands and so they rejected God’s authority and insisted on the freedom to define the good life for themselves. What they claimed for themselves is the same as expressive individualists claim for themselves today.

And the result of that was the curse of death. As Paul puts it in Romans 5, “... [S]in came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” This is the biblical verdict on expressive individualism. Mankind insists on freedom from God’s authority and the end of that is the curse and death.

The Bible claims that God makes the rules and that mankind flourishes by submitting to God’s authority. That is an important part of the biblical picture. Expressive individualism says that everyone is free to find happiness for themselves by finding themselves and expressing their individuality as they see fit. The Bible is also concerned about man’s happiness, but it insists that man’s happiness is found as a result of pursuing a greater goal which is loving and pleasing God. It is not that

man's happiness is of no concern to God. God is not that kind of being. The whole thrust of the Bible is to facilitate man's happiness, but one of the key biblical perspectives on that is that mankind finds the deepest and abiding happiness by seeking a greater end than his own happiness. True happiness in biblical perspective comes as a result of not making our own happiness the greatest priority.

Our happiness and greatest wellbeing come from living for God rather than living for ourselves. We were not designed to find our deepest happiness by focusing on ourselves. We are designed to find our deepest happiness in God. The Bible is actually very concerned with man's happiness, but as a result of living for God rather than living for ourselves. The picture that the Bible paints of a life in the service of God is a wonderful picture of fulfillment and wellbeing and profound happiness. The Bible makes it clear that the deepest joy that we can know is joy in the Lord and in his service. Psalm 32:11 says "Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!"

And Psalm 6 has a wonderful verse in this connection. Psalm 6:7 "You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound." The idea of grain and wine abounding is that of prosperity. The Psalmist says that the joy that God has put in his heart is greater than the joy of those who are rich and prosperous. The Bible and thus God himself is very concerned about the happiness of human beings, but that happiness comes not by human beings putting themselves first, but by human beings putting God first.

This does not mean that those who live for God do not suffer. God loves his people and desires their joy, but at the same time God, who is in control of all things, wills the suffering of his people. That is a great and complicated subject in Scripture. The reason that there is any suffering at all is because of sin, but it is also the case that God has chosen to use suffering in redemptive ways for the growth and wellbeing of his people. While suffering itself does not make people happy, it is possible for God's people to have joy in God even as they suffer. The people of God suffer knowing that in some mysterious way God is using their suffering for their good and his glory. And all of the

suffering of God's people must be understood in the light of God's purpose of perfect happiness for all the people of God forever when they are perfected and experience the end of their salvation in the new heavens and the new earth.

Now to get at the biblical response to expressive individualism we must include the biblical teaching of sin and salvation. We have seen the biblical connection between expressive individualism and the sin of Adam and Eve at the beginning. The essence of expressive individualism is the rejection of authority outside of ourselves and insisting on finding happiness in our own way. That is what Adam and Eve did when they fell into sin and that is what we all do by nature. When we think about expressive individualism in our society we are examining something that is out there. In the light of God's word, we see it for what it is and so we see it as something that is ultimately destructive and self-defeating.

But at the same time, the Bible teaches us that what is out there is also in here – that is in our own hearts. No matter what goes on in society around us and no matter how evil and futile we see it to be, the truth is that we are not essentially different than the people around us and what lives in their hearts also lives in our hearts. We are all expressive individualists, at heart, and it is our natural tendency to seek happiness by rejecting God's authority over us, by going our own way, by following our own hearts and by seeking happiness in life apart from God. There is a profound continuity between us and everyone else on this planet and that continuity is that we all share the same sinful nature.

And so the biblical response to expressive individualism includes the gospel of Jesus Christ which is God's summons to all to repent of expressive individualism and submit to Jesus and follow Jesus and trust in Jesus for forgiveness for our rebellion and the renewal of our lives.

And one of the ways that the gospel is presented to us in the Bible is as a call to die to self. Think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous words about discipleship. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." That is pretty much a paraphrase of Jesus' call to discipleship which we find, for instance, in Matthew 16:24-25, "... if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever

would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus calls us to deny ourselves. That is the exact opposite of expressive individualism which calls us to follow our hearts. Jesus calls us to follow him. That is also the exact opposite of expressive individualism which calls us to reject all authority outside of the self. Jesus calls us to take up our cross. That is also the exact opposite of expressive individualism which calls us to live for whatever pleases us. Self-denial. Following Jesus. Taking up our cross. Not living for ourselves. Submitting to Jesus as Lord. And embracing the suffering that comes from identifying with the One who was crucified, not because he was evil, but because he was good.

That is pretty much the exact opposite of the philosophy of expressive individualism. It is pretty much the exact opposite of the tendency of our sinful nature. And yet it is one of the forms of Jesus’ command to us as the one to whom all authority on earth and in heaven has been given. Jesus commands us to follow him. He requires that we submit to his authority.

But at the same time he assures us that following him is the way of life and wellbeing and rest and blessedness. He says, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” It’s counterintuitive to be sure. Dying to self as the way to life. Denying self as the way to happiness. Taking up our cross as the way to blessing and true wellbeing. But that is the gospel. That is the heart of the Christian message. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” The way of expressive individualism seems right to our sinful natures. Dying to self seems foolish and irrational. But expressive individualism is the way of death and the way to death. Denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus is the way of life and the way to life. We know this to be true. Let us live accordingly.