



P.O. Box 66540
Albuquerque, NM 87193
505.890.6806
E-mail: lrn@liferesource.org
Website: www.liferesource.org

Presentation Transcript
Preaching To the Choir, Part 7 – Self-Pity
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Most of us go about our busy lives with never enough time to get serious about our relationship with God – to reflect deeply – even though God has given us an entire day of the week for just that purpose. It seems like life is getting busier and busier and busier in this age. And I think a lot of that has to do with technology speeding everything up.

I'm reminded of what Paul tells us about one of Jesus' goals for all His children. You can read about it in Ephesians 5:27.

Ephesians 5:27 - *...so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*

Unlike some of us, Jesus does not assume that we're okay like we are. One scripture tells us that He is the architect of our salvation. He's working on all of us. And we need to be as interested in our perfection as He is. If we're going to be like Him, we should have similar interests. It's certainly in our own best interest to do that. Part of that process is recognizing the parts of us that need shoring up, or need eliminating or fixing. When we fill all our time with the cares of this life, there will be none left to participate in the work Jesus Christ wants us to do.

So let's think about it. Do you spend the time of your life feeling sorry for yourself? I look up the word in Webster's, and the definition of self-pity is *a self-indulgent dwelling on one's own sorrows or misfortunes.*

One of my former clients would take up entire sessions, if I let him, complaining about how unfair his life was, how miserable he was, how unhappy, how downtrodden. He was politically conservative and religious, and he worked in a helping profession as well. And he would complain endlessly about all the leftists in his field who would look down on him for his views and persecute him. I don't think – just knowing him – there was that much of an effort to persecute him. I think he just felt like everybody was against him everywhere he went. I noticed

that he would spew insulting comments about them – not just their ideas, but about their personalities, their behavior, their status, their intelligence level – things like that. I'm sure that just had to leak out somewhere when he was around the people he worked with. He had no idea that his approach was causing them to be defensive and want to attack him.

Early on, in Jesus' ministry, we're told that even though His worldview was completely opposite most of the people He met, He was still well-liked by people in general. We're told He was mild, gentle, easy-going, not judgmental at all. While He was all these things, He dynamically spread His worldview. And because of His approach, very many people accepted what He had to say. And they accepted Him as a person. It wasn't until He got in the cross hairs of the elites of His day that He ran into trouble. They couldn't tolerate somebody from outside their system having influence.

Now some of his venting is good in therapy – especially at the beginning. And it helped me see where the work needed to be done, but endlessly perseverating on the negative never moves us forward. It never moves us out of difficulty, and sometimes, it even digs the trough deeper, because we start thinking it really is as bad as we've said it is. So it just reinforces the negative. And then it seems that nothing can be done, so we quit trying, and we have learned helplessness, so to speak.

So my client would tell me about his pastor, his supervisor at work, his friends who would tell him all the right things. I listened to a lot of the things he told me they said, and it all sounded very reasonable – like good advice – but it would outrage him to hear it. For example, his pastor told him that God is always on our side. And that would set him off on a rampage of anger, saying that God had been silent while he languished all his life, uncared for, unloved, unheard, etcetera. So those who can see his situation can't resist giving advice, but the advice is always rejected. And the response to his isolation was God loves you. And that was seen by my client as the worst sort of feel-good Pollyanna Christianity. He just couldn't hear it. So the only thing left was to listen in silence or leave or be attacked by him. So I found hanging in there with him helped in the long run, but it was very slow. I had to listen enough that he began to be interested in what I thought. And, at that point then, I got a few licks in.

But being around somebody who complains about their life all their time and its problems turns others away. It wears on people. Everybody has problems – sometimes overwhelmingly so. It's hard to carry our difficulties and be immersed in those of others sometimes, because we've got enough to carry already. So, if we complain all the time, people tend to steer clear of us and we feel more isolated than we would have been otherwise.

Also, another problem with this kind of approach – of feeling sorry for oneself – is that it focuses on problem instead of solutions. If you're always talking about how bad things are, there is never any time to think about what to do about that. We said earlier that we need to think about problems to grow. And that's true, but if we think too much about it, that's a problem. So we

should think about self-pity, if we have that. The worst part of it, in my opinion, is that the focus is taken off of solution finding.

After people vent for several sessions, I sometimes recap what they told me. I enumerate the problems and then I challenge them to start proposing solutions to each one of those. I don't do that early on usually. Some people really get into that and are helped, but a surprisingly large percentage find no interest in it. They just want to keep talking about how bad they feel and how downtrodden they are.

So beside self-pity, they have a case of learned helplessness. We covered that earlier in this series. I usually don't take that step until we have dealt with all the traumatic issues, because most of the time those issues are literally stuck on the wrong side of their brain. And when that happens, no matter how hard a person tries to see things differently, it just isn't going to happen. So, how does one get to a better place when they feel sorry for themselves? How does one strengthen the mind so that we are capable of doing the work we need to do to change our lives?

Well, God tells us 365 times in the Bible, "Fear not! Don't be afraid. There is a way out of self-pity, but you have to want it. Here are some things to do to have a better walk with God:

First and foremost, *take action on your own behalf*. I've mentioned before, I think, that people sometimes, after one session, tell me, "I just feel so much better." And I say, "And yet, we're still assessing and haven't really gotten down to the therapy part yet." I think that that feeling good that they have comes from taking that first step – doing something, finally, to get going. You know, every journey begins with the first step. So making a call and going to see a counselor is just that. And even if you don't know what to do, try some things. Get some suggestions, if you're stuck. Talk to people that have had the problem or people that take care of those that have the problem – whatever is causing you to feel sorry for yourself. Talk to people you consider wise. Talk to more than one person. Read something about your issue. Just *do* something.

I've told this story over and over again, but it just keeps coming back to me – not only to help other people, but for my own life as well. When I was doing my counseling training, I had a practicum at a little mental health clinic right next door to a homeless shelter. The guy that ran the place was very well-known in town, and a lot of people would come there that were very well off and pay cash for their therapy. He told me that most of these people really didn't have anything to be depressed about or be anxious about. They had money. They had relationships. So he would take them outside with a couple of trash bags, and they would pick up trash around the homeless shelter down the street. And when they would get done, he would say, "Now don't you feel better?" Most of the time, they did! Just *do* something. Make an effort to get up and move around and to start looking for a solution.

Second point: *Stop complaining*. When I was about fourteen, I told my mother I wanted an Austin-Healy Sprite – a popular British sports car. The headlights were set up on the hood – not

right out at the sides, like they do now, kind of just inside of the fenders. So they called them Bug-eyed Sprites. And I would tell her how much I wanted one. And I told her I didn't have any money. I probably sang that song for a year, and one day she said, "Well, if you want one, save up your money and get it!" And I said, "Well that's what I'm telling you. I don't have any money and I don't have any way to get money. Can you buy it for me?" Of course, I knew that was not going to happen. And she said, "How long have you been talking about getting a paper route? That would be regular money you could save." Of course, we both knew that I would never save enough, while I was young, to get it. But, instead of talking about it, she said, "Get on your bike, ride to *The Times* office – you know where it is – put in an application. Do it now!" And I did. And that all is whole story in itself. I didn't buy a Bug-eyed Sprite for twelve years. I was in the ministry, even, before I got mine. Actually, I bought two of them from the same guy. They were both junkers. I remember I drove one home at two in the morning, because it didn't have any brakes. And the other one, I put the front wheels up in the back end of a pickup truck and tied it in there so that I could pull it home, like the pickup truck was a wrecker – with the front wheels off the ground. So they were both junkers and the whole experience was *not* satisfying. I was in way over my head. But it was educational nonetheless and I didn't have to spend a fortune to learn that lesson.

So, if we complain all the time – I had a mother that loved me, even though I did complain a lot to her – but it only tends to drive people away. So instead of complaining about life's difficulties, replace that with talking about your blessings.

In Luke 8:37 – this is very instructive for us, and I think we tend to look right past it. This is the incident where the man was possessed by a legion. And he would be a graveyard, and they had tied him up with chains, and he'd break them. He was mentally ill as well as having a demon.

Luke 8:37 – *Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes – or, in the King James, they're called Gadarenes, so I always use that word – asked him to depart from them – now this is talking about Christ, because, when He cast the legion out of the man, they went into a herd of pigs and ran into the sea and drowned. So everybody was upset because they lost so much money. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."*

Now, you know, if anybody wanted to complain, he certainly would have had a good reason to do so, wouldn't he – the misery he went on with for years. But Jesus told him to go and tell everybody what God had done for him. And that's always good for any of us.

One of the things Jesus wants us to is to proclaim how blessed we are – what He's done for us – not in a boastful way – because we didn't do the blessing. God did. And that's the point of it – to extol God's mercy and love and His power to help us. So, when we complain, we're not only digging our own rut deeper, but we're discouraging other people sometimes.

Okay, so those are two things we can do. Here's the third one: I just call this *getting inside God's reality*. God tells us that He is working out a mighty plan to do the impossible – at least by human efforts it's impossible. He is changing us from weak, limited, ambivalent, self-serving mortal beings that we are into strong, unlimited, committed, serving, immortal beings who will love God forever. There'll be no more ambivalence. We'll all just be glad to be with God. And to do this, He has given all of us free will like He has. We humans have done terrible, terrible things with this power. Sometimes we hurt others, and sometimes others hurt us, and sometimes we hurt ourselves by our foolish use of our free will. But there's no other way to get us where God needs us to be. That's why we have free will. It's got to be a free choice to love Him and be committed to Him.

Still, in this life, He promises us not a life of ease, or unlimited tomorrows, but a life of trials and tests, which will shape and move us, in the end, toward Him. He knows what each one of us needs.

Further, God is not interested just in you, but also all the people that you don't like and that don't like you. All those people, who have been unfair to you, who hurt you, all the people you *don't* like, all the people you disrespect and who disrespect you, He's working out a plan for them, too – everybody.

And beyond that, when we think about it, God does *not* do things the way we would. You can *never* figure out what He's going to do next. But no matter whether it seems good or bad, God promises that He has a plan for each of us, specifically crafted to lead to our victory in Jesus Christ and our eternal life with Him. You know, all those things you feel so bad about – feel downtrodden and like not fair and all that – God's allowed that to happen for a reason in your life and mine. So, our part – if you want to *do* something – get up and *do* something – our part in this plan is to show up and submit ourselves to the experiences He wants us to pass through. And while we're passing through it, we need to struggle to hold form. Do you know what *hold form* means? If you don't, you can go to YouTube and search for 1,500, 3,000 or 5,000 meter races – there's all kinds of stuff about track and field on YouTube – and you can see any number of races with lots of runners in them. And it's interesting to see that the ones who win usually hold their form. You know, when you run in good form, the reason people do that is because it's the most efficient way to run. You burn less energy doing it the right way all the way through to the finish line. When runners start getting tired, their form starts to deteriorate and makes it even harder to run fast or long. So *our* race is our life. And our form is to live our life like Jesus Christ lived His. Even though He had a thankless job, and knew from the outset He was going to lose His physical life, there's not a single instance anywhere in the Bible that He ever complained about anything. You might say, "Well, of course not. He had it in the bag from the beginning. He knew He was going to die to save all of us. That's why He came here." Okay, but can't we all say something very similar to that? We're here to become eternal members of God's family. That's our purpose. That's our destiny. And all we have to do is run the race and hold form. And then all

things will be ours.

You know, there's a situation where Paul writes about the people in the church at Corinth. And he said that some of the people there were aligning themselves with various leaders – some with him, some with Peter, some with Apollos. And he said, "Some say, 'I am of Apollos,' while others say, 'I am of Peter,'" and while others yet say, 'I am of Paul.'" No doubt, whichever one they aligned with, they probably complained about the other two and had stories to tell about how unfair those people had been to them. And here's what he said:

1 Corinthians 3:20-23 – *And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise – that they are futile. I means, that's what it means to be human, as we are futile. So let no one boast in men, for all things are yours – not yet, but... – all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

So, as it stands for most of us a good bit of the time, we don't see ourselves in possession of all things. We lose track of that great goal and the fantastic reward that God is going to give us. I mean, we can't even imagine what that's like. But from God's perspective, we have all the things we need – all the things that will feed us, help us, inspire us, strengthen us, teach us, move us unwaveringly toward Him – toward a relationship with Him – and eventually to live with Him forever in eternity. And, if we live in *that* reality with Him, then there isn't any reason at all to feel sorry for ourselves, but instead, we will, without any effort – without *any* effort – rejoice! You've just got to keep your eye on the goal – or, like one of my favorite movies, *Remember the Goal!*

I think I was in college, or maybe high school, when a guy named Bobby McFerrin had a hit song – as far as I know, the only hit he's ever had. He's a fantastic musician and he spent a lot of his adult life teaching children to play instruments at Carnegie Hall. He's a gifted teacher. And his song was called *Don't Worry, Be Happy*. That's where we need to be. And the way we do that, as Christians, is to remember that, eventually, all things are going to be ours, and to get there we have to go through what we're going through right now. So don't feel sorry. It's a test.

Okay, if you look on our Website, toward the bottom of the page dedicated to this presentation, you'll see a sub-head called "For Further Consideration." There you find a link to a page from *Psychology Today*. And on that page, you will see an article titled *Nine Ways To Get Past Self-Pity*. Sounds kind of cliché, doesn't it? Kind of like the title of my presentation, actually. But before you read the article, you should go down the page, because there's a video there about the author. And you should watch that video before you read her article. It will help you believe that she knows what she's talking about, because she has been through so many hard things. She's an expert at avoiding self-pity.

Okay, don't forget to comment on the Website. One other housekeeping item – by the time this

gets out, probably everybody that's interested will have figured it out, but – we closed our Facebook page. All we did with it was post notices about our presentations, and there was very little activity on it – probably because we spent very little time with it. And most people who are interested, have signed up for our emails, which we send out every two weeks, which notify about our presentations without having to go to Facebook. So we thought it was redundant. We also dropped Facebook because we can't abide what appears to be a disingenuous approach that the organization has now taken.

So until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.