“THE SELF-LIFE vs. THE GOD-LIFE”

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

Since the introduction of sin in the Garden of Eden, there have been “two kingdoms” in this world — the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God. The two trees in the garden represent these two kingdoms — the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life provided everything that is needed to live and walk with God... and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a way for man to set God’s life aside and proceed on his own, thus entering Satan’s realm, the kingdom of self. Everything we do in the kingdom of self is partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil — and is therefore sin. When we operate in that realm apart from God, we make ourselves our own god and push the true God aside. Scripture tells us that anything that does not come from faith (believing God) is sin (Rom 14:23); so sin is acting independently of God, not just committing conspicuously evil deeds.

Paul said that “Christ died for us that we who live might no longer live for ourselves but for Him who died and rose again on our behalf” (2 Cor 5:15). Thus Jesus died so that we could leave the kingdom of self and live in the kingdom of life. The “self-life” will elevate itself by crying out for, and insisting on having, the things that satisfy it — thus robbing the individual of the blessings of God’s kingdom. Jesus put it bluntly, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Mt 16:24-25). The question is this: Do you really want to follow Jesus? If so, you must then be willing to “deny yourself” — you must surrender the self-life.” Paul put it plainly when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Elsewhere he tells us to “lay aside our old self, which belongs to our former manner of life and which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and be renewed in the spirit of our mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:22-23). Our corrupt nature, our old spiritually dead self-life, must be put off, denied, rejected, crucified — it must die because it cannot be reformed and will not die of its own accord. Notice the old self is governed by “the lusts of deceit” — these desires are very deceptive: they promise life, but bring death (Read Gen 3:6; Is 1:6; Jer 17:9; Mk 7:21-22; Rom 7:11).

Why do we as believers insist on living the “self-life” as opposed to the “God-life”? Because they still do not really believe that the “God-life” is as fulfilling and satisfying as the “self-life;” they continue to buy into the lie that the ways of God are not as pleasing or enjoyable as their own ways. The “innate depravity of the human heart” is the reason they believe such thoughts (Jer 17:9). The source of all human difficulty is the human heart (Gen 3:6; Prv 4:23); the human heart is more deceptive or crooked than anything else — it is desperately corrupt and, humanly speaking, incurable. Jesus said, “All evil thoughts and actions proceed out of the heart” (Mt 15:19). Though believers have trusted God unto salvation, the sinful propensities of their flesh still remains in them; thus they continue to arbitrate between the desires of the flesh and those of the spirit — “without an immediate rejection of the arguments of the flesh,” the devil will convince them of its advantages and capture them in his snare (Gen 3:1-6; 1 Tim 6:9; 2 Tim 2:26; Jam 4:7; 1 Pt 5:8). To consider or entertain what the devil has to say, is to invite certain failure; man does not have the capacity to entertain sin and then choose what is right; it is simply not in him.
The believer must learn to believe in the “goodness of God” (Ps 34:8; 84:11; 100:5; 106:1; Jam 1:17), and learn to trust in His goodness despite his circumstances. Jesus responded to a young man who questioned Him about salvation: “No one is good except God alone” (Mk 10:18); since God is good in Himself, by definition He is good to His creatures. By the way, God is not only good in the metaphysical sense (He is absolute perfection), but also in the ethical sense — He is both the highest good, and the fountain of all good. “The Lord is good to all.... and satisfies the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:9, 16); this benevolent interest of God is revealed in His care for the welfare of all His creatures (Mt 5:45; 6:26; Lk 6:35; Acts 14:17). The goodness of God assumes the higher character of “love” — God does not even withdraw His love completely from the sinner in his present sinful state, though His sin is an abomination to Him; He recognizes that even the sinner bears His image (Jn 3:16; Mt 5:44-45). At the same time God loves believers with a “greater love” since they are His children; it is to them that He communicates Himself in the fullest and richest sense, with all the fullness of His grace and mercy (Jn 16:27; Rom 5:8; 1 Jn 3:1). God’s love to man is always unmerited, and when it is offered to sinners, it is often forfeited. Even in spite of evil, God is working out His good purposes in our lives (Gen 50:20; Job 42:9-17; Jn 11:32, 43; Rom 8:28). God is involved in every realm of life to bring about His good ends — the goodness and grace of God is the source of every spiritual blessing that is bestowed upon sinners (Eph 1:6-7; 2:7-9; Phil 2:13; Tit 2:11; 3:4-7). Therefore, being that God is infinitely good, why do we continue to embrace the “self-life”?

The “kingdom of self” must not be appeased, instead it must be defeated and destroyed.
The flesh (the self-life) must die along with its passions and desires; by the way, the passions and desires of the flesh are not just the actions commonly deemed evil such as adultery, murder and drunkenness — the flesh also desires food, clothing, a nice house, a classy car, friends, leisure time, a house at the beach and one in the mountains, a rewarding career, a beautiful wife, a handsome husband, great kids, and many other things. And it has its own standards of conduct concerning such things as cleanliness, work ethic, habits; as such, it holds everyone in judgment based on its own standards. Marriages collapse because of the collision of two fleshly self-lives; unless those self-lives are dealt with, many marriages are doomed. The primary role of the self-life is selfishness; its goal is to obtain what the flesh desires. By nature all of us are self-kingdom-minded — we are consumed with self. Though we are often willing to crucify the more overtly evil passions, what about the desires we have that are socially acceptable?

Perhaps the story of the rich young ruler will provide us with an answer. Jesus said to him, “Sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come and follow Me” (Mt 19:21). The rich man’s unwillingness to share his possessions, showed that he did not love his neighbor as himself; as such, he walked away sad, as do many of us. Riches tend to become an idol; it is extremely hard to have them and not trust in them; that’s why Jesus said “it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:23-24). He said in the Sermon on the Mount, “No man can serve two masters” (Mt 6:24) — one will inevitably take precedence in his loyalty and obedience; ultimately, a choice must be made as to whom/what we will serve; either we will put God first and reject the rule of materialism or we will live for temporal things and refuse God’s claim on our lives. Jesus shows here the utter impossibility of loving the world and loving God at the same time; hence a man of the world cannot be a truly spiritual man. The master of our heart may be fitly termed the love that reigns in it. Our supreme affections can be fixed on only one object — God or Self — and we only serve that which we love supremely. Following is a description of what “God-centered living” and “Self-centered living” look like:
What does “God-centered living” look like?

- Confidence in God
- Dependence on God and His ability and provision
- Life focused on God and His activity
- Humbleness before God
- Denying self
- Seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness
- Seeking God’s perspective in every circumstance
- Holy and godly living

What does “Self-centered living” look like?

- Self-confidence
- Depending on self and self’s own abilities
- Life focused on self
- Pride in self and self’s accomplishments
- Affirming self
- Seeking to be acceptable to the world and its ways
- Looking at circumstances from a human perspective
- Selfish and ordinary living

We have all been designed by God to be “value-oriented, purpose-motivated beings.” God gave us this capacity because He designed us to “worship Him” (ascribing supreme worth to Him above everything else); obviously, very few things truly have intrinsic value. This side of eternity things rise in importance beyond their true importance — we place an inordinate value on them, and that sets the agenda for our thoughts, desires, choices, words, and actions. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:21). The heart, being the summary term for the inner man, could be characterized as the causal core of our personhood. What Jesus is saying here is profound. He is suggesting that there is a war of treasure that is being fought at the center of what makes us think what we think, desire what we desire, and do what we do. Whether we are conscious of it or not, our words and actions are always an attempt to get what we value — what controls our heart will control our behavior. So what is the essence of this battle? It is working daily to “keep what God says” as the supremely important thing in our personal lives. Remember, by God’s design, we are worshipers; that means everything we do and say is the product of worship (what we truly value — read Rom 12:2). Thus the treasures (i.e., the things that have risen to levels of importance in our hearts) that rule the thoughts and desires of our heart will ultimately control the things we do. So the war between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God is not just a war of behavior, but a war for the heart — and if we lose this deeper war, we will never gain ground in the arena of our thoughts, words and actions. Either we have attached our inner life and sense of well-being to the earth-bound treasures of the kingdom of self, or to the heavenly treasures of the kingdom of God. Following are a number of very poignant diagnostic questions that can help us get back on the road to recovery in the event we have lost our focus — though these questions were originally addressed to pastors, they are equally applicable to the lives of all believers. Carefully ponder your answers —

- The “absence of what” causes you to want to give up and quit?
- The “pursuit of what” leads you to feeling over-burdened and overwhelmed?
- The “fear of what” makes you tentative and time rather than courageous and hopeful?
- The “craving of what” makes you burn the candle at both ends until you have little left?
- The “need for what” robs ministry of its beauty and joy?
- The “desire for what” sets up tensions between ministry and family?
None of us wants to hear some of the “tougher injunctions” in Scripture, because our “self-kingdom” is strong and fights for its survival — it cries out in desperation for its life and pleads for its desires. It will not go down without a brutal fight and if we attempt to appease it, it will win the ultimate war. Its king, the god of this world, whitewashes our fleshly desires and makes them respectable. He even uses the arena of religion and the church to accomplish his goals; the serpent doesn’t care if our actions are nice, socially acceptable, or even church related — as long as Christ does not initiate them, he promotes them because his realm is the kingdom of self. The question is, who is initiating what we are doing? Too often our churches are simply expressions of the “self-kingdoms of people” who use the church for their own goals: to make them feel good about themselves. We are sacrificing true spiritual growth on the altar of the self-kingdom. The kingdom of self is merely a counterfeit of God’s purpose for the church. Paul prophesied that the time would come when religious people would “be lovers of self… having the appearance of godliness, but denying the power” (2 Tim 3:5); they would be lovers of self, enthroning self as their god — if you call the shots in your life, YOU are the “lord and master” of your life (not Christ); all the while, taking on an external appearance of godliness, but spurning the power of God that brings true godliness.

More than likely we are living in the days of “self-made religion” to which Paul is referring. Throughout the church we see the fabrications of man-made religion empowered by fleshly ability rather than the power of God. Many of our worship services have become entertainment confabs where self is glorified rather than denied… where the Word of God is watered down, and does not inspire us to passionately seek intimacy with a holy God. We have conformed ourselves to a world that worships self. The “cult of self” is endemic in Western culture — our society screams for self-fulfillment, self-satisfaction, and self-gratification, and to a large degree, the “kingdom of self” has invaded the kingdom of God as well. In many ways the church today has traded self-denial for self-fulfillment. Many perceptive Christian leaders have noted this overemphasis on self even in evangelicalism. Well-known British author and social critic, Os Guinness, is one believer who has long charted these worrying trends. In one of his books he has a challenging chapter on the “triumph of the therapeutic” which plagues much of Western Christendom. Guinness says the Western church in large part has shifted its emphasis from salvation to self-realization — [by loving yourself you can realize your wonderful potential]; which is nothing less than the secularization of salvation.

Craig Gay has written an incisive book entitled “The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As if God Does Not Exist.” In it he echoes the thoughts of Guinness: “In effect, the modern therapeutic disposition mortgages eternal destiny for the sake of comfort.”

James Davison Hunter, a professor of religion, culture and social theory, noted in 1983 that American evangelicalism had gone through a major shift in the latter half of the twentieth century — “it has tended to downplay self-denial, sacrifice and suffering, while fulfillment, happiness and an emphasis on self is stressed;” essentially, he says, “subjectivism has become the dominant attitude in theologically conservative Protestant culture.”

Professor David Wells, of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has written a number of books on these and related themes. In a recent book he devotes most of his discourse to this theme of the “triumph of the self” in modern culture. Wells writes, “Much of the Church today, especially that part of it which is evangelical, is in captivity to this idolatry of the self. This is a form of corruption far more profound than the lists of infractions that typically pop into our
minds when we hear the word sin. We are trying to hold at bay the gnats of small sins while swallowing the camel of self…. The contemporary Church [in America] is whoring after this god as assiduously as the Israelites in their darker days. It is baptizing as faith the pride that leads us to think much about ourselves and much of ourselves.” Elsewhere Wells writes, “This kind of self-fascination… is at the very center of evangelicalism.”

**Charles Colson of Watergate fame, is another astute observer of culture.** He states it thus: “Outwardly, we are a religious people, but inwardly our religious beliefs make no difference in how we live. We are obsessed with self.” He says much of the church today is caught up in the success mania of American society—“suffering, sacrifice, and service have been preempted by success and self-fulfillment” The remarks of Christian sociologist David Lyon should also be mentioned. In a penetrating analysis of the intersection of postmodernism and religion in an article titled “Jesus in Disneyland,” he speaks of the sacralization of self.” He too is aware of the transformation of religion where the idea of selecting your own personal potpourri of beliefs (choosing what fits and what does not), “appears to be a popular mode of religiosity or spirituality today, especially in North America.”

Interestingly it was the earlier SECULAR analyses by social observers like Reiff & Lasch that paved the way for later evangelical critiques. [think about that!] Back in 1966, American sociologist and social critic Philip Reiff released his The Triumph of the Therapeutic.” There he states that faith after Freud has made a remarkable journey—“Religious man was born to be pleased,” [did you catch that?] About a decade later the secular American historian Christopher Lasch spoke of this therapeutic sensibility” with prophetic insight: “The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation… but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.” [Remember, this is a secular analysis of religion in America!]

**Other SECULAR assessments could be noted.** In 1985, American sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues observed in their influential “Habits of the Heart” the visible tendency in many evangelical circles to “thin the biblical language of sin and redemption to an idea of Jesus as the friend who helps us find happiness and self-fulfillment.” Is that not the flavor of most evangelical churches in America today? And in 1987, the popular author Allan Bloom wrote, “The self is the modern substitute for the soul.” In fact, way back in 1958 this trend was noted: two secular sociologists did a study of popular inspirational literature from 1875–1955. They concluded their survey this way: “The [evangelical] literature presents a man-centered rather than a God-centered religion. It is preoccupied with power, success, life-mastery, and peace of mind and soul, and not with salvation, in the other sense of the term.”

**Thus both Secular & Christian critiques of modern culture have noted this drift to “self.”** If Western Christianity is guilty of an unwarranted appeal to self, it is in many ways simply reflecting the wider secular culture of which it is a part. Wells reminds us, “This fascination with self is not a uniquely Christian or uniquely American phenomenon; it is the calling card [materialistic] modernity leaves behind wherever it goes.” A good indication of this drift to self in the church can be seen in any contemporary Christian magazine or bookstore: they are filled with articles and books devoted to self. Titles abound on such themes as how to lose weight for Jesus…how to overcome self-doubt…how to improve self-image…how to find inner healing…
how to achieve peace of mind… how to achieve self-realization… how to find fulfillment and success, prosperity and peace. Indeed, the “how to” type of book seems to be proliferating in Christian publishing circles. Sadly, books which offer such an anthropocentric emphasis far outnumber books which rightly emphasize the theocentric — bubble-gum religion has replaced serious theology, hands down! Obviously there is a place for self-improvement and self-help books, but ultimate self-improvement comes from a right relationship with God, not a fixation on self — did you catch that? The point is this: *SELF dominates in contemporary Christianity,* and when anything other than God predominates, that essentially is IDOLATRY.

**So how do we respond to all this?** In one sense, the answer is as simple as it is obvious: we just need to start taking Jesus at His word, and start doing what He said. What did he tell us to do? Consider this: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.” For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and that of the gospel shall save it” (Mk 8:34-35). There you have it. The gospel is not about satisfying self, gratifying self, gorging self, flattering self, or cuddling self — it is about denying self… putting self to death. Until this message is rediscovered and once again proclaimed in our pulpits, we will see the church continue to hemorrhage to death, unable to make its mark on the surrounding culture. The contrast between today’s weak, anemic and self-fixated Christianity and that of the early church could not be more pronounced. The early disciples turned their world upside down (Acts 17:6) — today’s church, in contrast, is being turned upside down by the world! And so many believers either do not know this, or do not care. British author and professor of Church History, Leonard Ravenhill was right to exclaim that what the world needs today are men who are “dead to self… dead to ambition… dead to feelings… dead to being offended… dead to being flattered… DEAD!” Ravenhill was a revivalist and close friend of A. W. Tozer, and his ministry had a profound influence on a large group Christian leaders here in America during the middle years of the twentieth century… including Ravi Zacharias, Keith Green, Charles Stanley, David Wilderson, and others. Here are a few of his well-known sayings:

- “The only reason we don’t have revival is because we are willing to live without it!”
- “Today’s church wants to be raptured from responsibility.”
- “If weak in prayer, we are weak everywhere.”
- “Are the things you are living for worth Christ dying for?”
- “The Church used to be a lifeboat… now it is a cruise ship.”
- “A sinning man stops praying, a praying man stops sinning.”
- “My main ambition in life is to be on the devil’s most wanted list.”
- “If Jesus had preached the same message that ministers preach today… He would never have been crucified.”

**The late A.W. Tozer posited these questions:** “When will Christians learn that… to love righteousness it is necessary to hate sin? to accept Christ it is necessary to reject self? to follow the good way we must flee from evil? and to be a friend of the world is to be an enemy of God?”

*Said Guinness:* “The cross of Jesus runs crosswise to all our human ways of thinking.” So, how is it possible to seek God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and not our own? (Mt 6:33). As the Lord said to Zechariah, “It is not by [your] might or by [your] power, but by My Spirit” (Zech 4:6). The apostle Paul prayed for all the saints in the church at Ephesus that God would “strengthen them with power through His Spirit in the inner man… that they might be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:14-19). The destruction of the kingdom of self comes as we are “stress-
enewed with power through God’s Spirit in the inner man.” The Holy Spirit has been given to us for the very purpose of providing us with the power to do what God calls us to do. Paul goes on to say that “God is able to do far more than our minds can comprehend and this ability is according to the power of the Holy Spirit within us” (Eph 3:20). So the God-life is not the result of human ability and power, but of God’s supernatural power working in and through us (Eph 1:18-19); and it is “according to His riches in glory” that this work is accomplished (Phil 4:13,19). It is all done by the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit that has been released into our lives.

It should be clear from all of the foregoing passages that it is “God’s power” that does the transformational work; though we do the planting and the watering so-to-speak, God causes the growth (1 Cor 3:6). As believers, we have the responsibility to “walk by faith”… “obey God’s directives”… “deny ourselves”… “follow Him” — those are our responsibilities as believers; when we do our part, God does His part (Eph 4:1; 6:10; Phil 2:12-13; 3:14; 1 Tim 6:12; Jam 4:8). God is not going to let us sit in the grandstands and simply be spectators; He has called us to get out on the playing field and follow His instructions! Is living the God-life easy? Of course not! This is a war against our very flesh, and our flesh is not going to surrender without a fight! The issue is this: “Are we willing to engage in this battle DAILY?” In order to effectively fight this war and live a God-centered life, the number one priority in any believer’s life must be that of “cultivating an intimate walk with Christ” — by the way, if that is really your heart’s desire, it will show itself in the amount of time you spend in the Word… because that is the instrument God uses to transform our lives and plant transforming truths in our hearts — “it’s the believer’s playbook!” (Jn 8:31-32; 15:7; Rom 10:17; Gal 3:2; Col 3:16; 2 Tim 2:15; Jam 1:21-22; 1 Pet 2:2). If you happen to feel totally defeated at this point in your walk, you need to DAILY take your case before God, pleading with Him to deliver you from the bondage of your flesh (because that is your problem!), and then spend an HOUR a day prayerfully studying His Word. If you are really serious about walking with God, you won’t find this hourly sacrifice a very big deal, but if you aren’t serious it will be a burdensome intrusion in your life. The apostle John said, “This is the victory that overcomes the world — our faith” (1 Jn 5:4). Faith is simply a matter of affirming the truths of Scripture until they settle peacefully in the heart, and living in the light of those truths (2 Cor 5:7; Gal 2:20; Heb 11:1,6).

In addition to the various individuals stated in the material above, some aspects of this study were taken from the writings of the following authors —

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*Note the contrasts between the “Self-life” and the “God-life” on the next page.*
NOTE THE FOLLOWING CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE KINGDOM OF SELF & THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Kingdom of Self says — You are the most important thing in life; seek to please yourself.
The Kingdom of God says — Set your mind on things above; don’t seek to please yourself.

The Kingdom of Self says — Seek immediate gratification; you only go around once in life.
The Kingdom of God says — Postponing temporal gratification has incomparable eternal rewards.

The Kingdom of Self says — Make as much money as you can; this is the road to a truly happy life.
The Kingdom of God says — Learn to be content with what you have; store up treasure in heaven.

The Kingdom of Self says — Enjoy having sex with whoever you want to have sex with.
The Kingdom of God says — Sex is God’s gift to us, but it is exclusively reserved for marriage.

The Kingdom of Self says — You are happy if you are self-assured and in control of your life.
The Kingdom of God says — True happiness trusts God with everything in life.

The Kingdom of Self says — There are no absolutes and no rights & wrongs; all truth is relative.
The Kingdom of God says — There are absolutes and rights & wrongs… and Jesus is the truth.

The Kingdom of this world has its own priorities, its own interests, its own values, and its own philosophy. It all seems so real, so enduring, but the reality is it will not last. It is temporary. It is doomed, and will one day be totally destroyed… and the kingdom of this world will become the Kingdom of our God. Meanwhile, the challenge before us is to continue to live in the world, but not be of the world — in doing so, we share God’s values, His priorities, and His interests… and ultimately we will enjoy living and ruling with Him for all eternity. The choice is yours.