



Leadership Letter

Can you forget yourself?

I was recently challenged in my thinking by a little book by Timothy Keller called *the freedom of self forgetfulness*. I will summarise some of the content for you in the following letter.

The traditional thinking for centuries has been that the main problem in our world is *hubris*, Greek for pride, and that people with a high self-esteem pose a greater threat to those around them than those with low self-esteem. Today we tend to think that society's basic problem is the latter - a lack of self-esteem. I Corinthians 3:21-4:7 appears to be opposed to both forms of self-esteem. Paul says our ego seeks to compare and boast. We compare ourselves with others and either judge ourselves superior or feel we are falling short. We boast about our strengths or seek to beat ourselves up by being the worst at something! The word pride gives the idea of being overinflated or swollen and refers to the condition of our ego, our 'old nature or old man'.

Here are four words that help to describe our ego:

Empty – it gets puffed up yet has nothing at the centre. We build our identity around something other than God and feel we can run our own lives, make our own decisions and plans and will be good at it.

Painful – we don't notice our body until there is something wrong with it. Our ego always draws attention to itself. For example how we look, how we are treated, how we are hurting. Our feeling can't be hurt though, it's our ego that is. Something is wrong with our ego that needs this attention and stops it from ever being happy.

Busy – we try to fill the emptiness by doing things. We compare and boast and are competitive. We are so busy with self. The strengthfinder test for gaining an understanding of your strengths has become very popular. I have done it several times but it bothers me a little. One of my top strengths is achiever – every day I need to achieve something. The question comes to mind, "Am I seeking to please my ego or please God?" I think there is a fine line. What about the strengths of 'self assurance, competition or command? I am sure there are positive qualities in there but we have to be so careful of this deadly sin of pride. It creeps in and deceives and corrupts us. Pride gets pleasure out of having more of something than the next person – not just having something! I need to be more successful, more attractive, more intelligent...

Fragile – anything overinflated, is in danger of being deflated. So whether it's superiority or inferiority, they are both the same. Ego can't be satisfied so any success today has to be matched or bettered tomorrow. Any attention today that feeds my self pity needs to be filled up again tomorrow. The Corinthians used their knowledge of Paul to put themselves one step above others. Perhaps we slip into name dropping to gain that extra status in talking to someone. Paul says

he doesn't look to the Corinthians or any court to gain his sense of identity. Counsellors will tell us that 'its what I think about myself that matters' but Paul says 'I don't judge myself' – I have a low opinion of yours and my opinion of who I am. He says, 'I am the worst of sinners.' He is confident, honest and aware of his own condition. His sins and identity are not connected. I don't know about you, but I tend to judge myself. I measure myself against my expectation of a good performance, with what others say and what others expect as a standard. So my ego feels good or bad depending on the assessment!

So what we need is not greater self-esteem but humility. Humility, the number one quality that is affirmed in Jesus in Philippians 2, is not thinking more or less of myself but thinking of myself less. The self forgetful person doesn't talk about themselves being a nobody and isn't hurt by criticism. The humble person hears criticism and sees the opportunity to change. This person doesn't need honour but isn't afraid of it either. The person who is in control of their ego doesn't lust for recognition but isn't frightened by it. They don't admire themselves or cringe at their image in the mirror. When they win second place with silver, they are thrilled for those who win gold. When the self forgetful person needs to give constructive feedback to others behaviour they don't judge or get upset or feel superior. Whenever we judge someone else we are in effect saying – the world would be a better place if there were more people like me (with a strength in this area!).

Paul says imitate me as I imitate Christ. Take my positive traits and imitate them. In his earlier life he was probably too impulsive, action oriented and perhaps harsh with people. But now he says, 'I'm crucified with Christ, it's no longer I that live but Christ who lives within me.' Again in Romans he says, 'Offer your bodies as living sacrifices...don't be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' Jesus says, 'deny yourself and take up your cross daily.' Our ego is too in control of our minds, bodies, self image and calling.

So what can we do?

- Refuse to feed our ego with the attention that it craves, so let's not pat ourselves on the back, make the 'poor me' sounds or start comparing ourselves with others.
- When we feel hurt, tired, frustrated, taken for granted or passed over, ask ourselves the question, "What lesson can I be learning right now?"
- Be thankful for every opportunity that we are given of blessing and affirming others by kind words, generous actions and honourable attitudes.
- Think of the best ways that we can serve others interests and help put to death self interest.
- Prefer one another in love by making others priority in our lives, and sacrificing time and energy that we would otherwise focus on ourselves.
- Pray blessing on others regularly, in private and in public.
- Take breaks when we need them in order to be refreshed and give our full energy to God, so that he in turn can fill our tanks full of himself.

As I write this letter I have been away from home for a couple of weeks and am feeling a bit homesick. My ego would like me to feel sad. Then it would like me to feel bad that I have left Rite at home looking after a team retreat all by herself.

I could start thinking about the 28 hour trip home and I begin to hear the violins playing the 'poor me' concerto but I choose to stop. No, this has been an important assignment from God. I have enjoyed the new friendships I have made, I have been able to impart some of my teaching and I will be blessed myself because of how these people have enriched my life.

So let's really live life to the full and nail to the cross our wretched ego one day at a time. Slowly it will become submissive but not without a fight.

Nearly forgot to sign off...

'til next month

Steph