

FLESHLY WINDS

WINDS OF DOCTRINE 3



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Fleshly Winds

Fleshly Winds: Winds of Doctrine 3
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Fleshy Winds

Welcome to *Fleshy Winds*

Some ill winds of doctrine become ensconced in the sails of our soul, where they blow us off course in our journey with the Lord.

These also derive from humanism, but they seem to be more inward and personal than the worldly winds we examined in our last installment.

We need to recognize and guard against these fleshly winds as well, for they can easily overtake us.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Narcissism

I wrote to the church, but Diotrophes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. 3 John 1.9

Winds in the soul

The Spirit of God blows gently and continuously within our soul, filling its sails and directing us on the course of truth, through the shoals of the lie, according to the Word of God, with increasing zeal for Jesus Christ and love for God and our neighbors. This is the pure and holy Wind of God by which we make progress unto Christlikeness in the life of faith. The Wind of God seeks out the sails of our soul – on the masts of heart, mind, and conscience – so that we desire, delight in, and love the things of God; receive, give attention to, and cultivate interest in His Word; and assimilate Him and His will as the highest values and priorities for every aspect of our lives.

Life would be smooth sailing unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit if the only wind vying for the sails of our soul was the Wind of God. But as we have seen, that is not the case. Worldly winds of humanism, secularism, materialism, scientism, relativism, postmodernism, and evolutionism blow against us daily from a wide variety of sources. We must learn to recognize these winds and keep them from finding a reception within our soul, so that we are not blown off course in our journey with the Lord.

Additional ill winds, deriving ultimately from the humanism of the world, rise up from within us to turn our course from that of the Lord to one of our own choosing. The law of sin, that continues within us for now, gives rise to a variety of self-serving breezes which, if they gain access to the sails of our soul, can cause us to drift from our great salvation and drive us toward unstable and uncharted waters. We must learn to recognize these winds as well, which would allure us to consider self-interest as the most important concern of our lives.

The first of these fleshly winds is narcissism.

Narcissism defined

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is again helpful here. It defines narcissism as “excessive interest in or admiration of oneself and one’s physical appearance.” It continues, adding that narcissism is “extreme selfishness, with a grandiose view of one’s own talents and a craving for admiration, as characterizing a personality type.” In an article in *Aeon/Psyche*, W. Keith Campbell puts this definition more clearly: “The term ‘narcissism’ has become a household word. We’ve seen this ‘me first’ mentality evolve on social media, and we use the word to describe celebrities, politicians and even some of our coworkers and friends. We commonly say that someone is ‘narcissistic’ to mean they’re selfish, manipulative or driven by ego.”

Not long ago, those who monitor and publish the official handbook of psychological disorders considered dropping narcissism from their catalogue, so widespread had the condition become. In the end, however, they let it remain in place. Campbell explains, “we tend to think of narcissists as brash, flashy people who take over a conversation, but new studies have shown that insecure narcissists exist as well. They’re still self-involved and self-focused but are more hidden from public view.”

Was Diotrophes of Ephesus an “insecure narcissist”? Or was he just so full of himself that he didn’t care what anybody thought, and resolved to make himself the center of all attention in the church?

Interest in narcissism as a growing concern began back in the 1970s when Christopher Lasch published his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*. The arrival of social media early in this century both recognized the growing presence of this fleshly wind, and offered additional opportunities for it to blow wildly across the souls of multitudes.

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Narcissism has become rampant. We see the course on which it drives us: Fixation on self and how we look, what others think of or are saying about us, talking endlessly about our own trivial pursuits, taking selfies and posting them everywhere, friending and unfriending according to the whims of the moment, and much more.

The fleshly wind of narcissism wells up from the law of sin within us and encourages the idea that what matters most in life is that “you be you” and that you look out for number 1 (to borrow a line from Robert Ringer) in everything you do. After all, if you don’t care for you, who will?

Problems with narcissism

The great problem with narcissism where Christian faith is concerned is that it detracts from the proper focus of faith. Christians are identified as those who love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and their neighbors as themselves. These are our two great commandments (Matt. 22.34-40). But the winds of narcissism stir up self-love in the soul, so that we think of our faith in terms of what we can get out of it. Church is for me. Worship is for me. Bible study group is about me. My Christian friends are about me. Even my reading and study of the Bible is about me – what I want, or need, or enjoy because it reinforces my exalted self-image.

Everything a narcissist does is designed to spotlight him, to make him the center of attention and the bright shining star of any situation. The need to be recognized and admired becomes all-consuming, and this can become a serious hindrance to a self-denying, sacrificial life of following the Lord.

Churches can be tempted to cater to the narcissistic winds of our day, adjusting worship and other ministries more to the liking of people than for the purpose of honoring God and serving Him. We tend to ask not, What is God expecting of us here? but instead, What can we do to keep people happy and coming back for more?

A church whose sails are influenced by narcissism can drift from Scripture and seeking the Kingdom and glory of God into the shallows of entertainment and people-pleasing. We need to recognize this breeze as it wells up from within us, and ask the Wind of God to replace it with self-denying love for God and neighbors.

For reflection

1. Why is narcissism detrimental to Christian faith?
2. What might suggest that you were being influenced by the ill wind of narcissism?
3. How can you use your prayer life to recognize and divert any narcissistic tendencies?

Next steps – Preparation: As you look ahead to the coming day, pray for the people you will meet, and ask God to show you one way you can affirm, encourage, or assist each one. Keep self last, and you’ll keep any narcissistic winds out of the sails of your

2 Presentism

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5.15, 16

Walk circumspectly

The apostle Paul reminds us that “the days are evil.” They were evil in his day, and they continue evil in ours. One reason this is so is that many contrary winds of doctrine want to blow us off course in our journey with the Lord. Many of these come at us from without, worldly winds that circle the globe continuously, looking for sails to fill and vessels to capture.

Other winds derive from within us, where concern for self above all else can creep into our thinking, unrecognized, and cause us to drift from our great salvation. Narcissism is one of these. Another is what many writers today are referring to as “presentism.” Presentism encourages us to “live for the moment,” “seize the day,” or “make the most of your time in the now.”

Paul’s word to the believers in Ephesus was to “walk circumspectly.” This meant several things. The Christian lives from a different vantage point that people who do not have faith. So, in chapter 1, Paul calls us to gaze with the eye of the heart on Jesus, exalted in glory, and filling the world with Himself. In some sense, we need to “see” Him there, to be encouraged and strengthened by looking up to our risen and reigning Lord (Eph. 1.15-23)..

But Paul also urged us to look back, to remember both what God has done for our salvation, and the promises and covenant He made with His people so long ago (Eph. 2.1-12). We must always be looking back to the fact that we are God’s image-bearers, redeemed in Christ, and working each day to lay hold on the precious and very great promises He extended so long ago, and have all been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

We also need to keep an eye on the future. Seeking the Kingdom of God, and praying that it will come on earth as it is in heaven, implies that we have some sense of the way things ought to be. Paul addresses this in chapters 4-6 of Ephesians, as he instructs the believers to press on in their discipleship, in building the Church, and in fighting the good fight of the Kingdom of God.

With these three “looks” in our purview, we can then “walk circumspectly” and “redeem the time” God gives us, wresting each moment of our lives from the grip of evil, and trimming the sails of our soul to embrace and billow with the Wind of God.

Presentism is an ill wind of doctrine that arises within us when we forsake our Christian vantage point on life and look only, like Peter, sinking into the sea, at the tumult and turbulence around us.

Presentism defined

Advocates of presentism “point to the ‘singularity’ of the present moment: the idea that the *now* is all we have (temporally). I will use *singular*, in the claim ‘The present moment is singular’, to refer to this idea of ‘being the one and only’. The ‘singularity thesis’ is the idea that the present moment is all we have – the one and only time.” So writes John Martin Fisher in “The Problem of Now,” (*Aeon* 8 January 2021). He explains that those who sail by the winds of presentism believe that “we should focus our full attention on the present moment precisely because of its singularity.”

In his book, *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, Alan Jacobs argues that one way to escape the trap of presentism is to devote ourselves to reading good books from the past. He writes, “To open yourself to the past is to make yourself less vulnerable to the cruelties of descending in tweeted wrath on a young woman whose clothing

you disapprove of, or firing an employee because of a tweet you didn't take time to understand, or responding to climate change either by ignoring it or by indulging in impotent rage. You realize that you need not obey the impulses of this moment—which, it is fair to say, never tend to produce a tranquil mind.”

Dr. Jacobs wants us to become “denser” as people, and to enlarge our “temporal bandwidth” by communing with great writers and their ideas. Reading great books from the past, in other words, is a way to escape the trap of presentism, of having one's perspective constricted to the moment, and thus to act and engage on the basis of very limited resources.

We can also become “denser” in our souls by meditating on Christ, exalted in glory; living toward the promises of God; seeking the Kingdom of God unto increased righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit; and long and eagerly anticipating the return of Jesus in glory, and the ensuing new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells.

The presentist believes that this moment, this singularity of time, is the interpretive key to everything – all that has happened before, and all that will come to pass hereafter. Presentism has no sense of history, no appreciation of heavenly mysteries, and only the vaguest, shape-shifting charts for how to navigate through life into the future.

Letting such a view fill the sails of our soul can drive our Christian journey onto rocks of despair.

Problems with presentism

When in 410 the city of Rome was sacked and burned, people throughout the Roman Empire feared it might be the end of the world. The great singularity had occurred; the empire which had lasted for centuries was in ashes; and the barbarians were wreaking havoc on every border.

Writing from North Africa, Augustine calmly, clearly, and convincingly called believers and any other readers to keep things in perspective, and not to give up hope. In *City of God*, Augustine rehearsed the history of Rome and all the reasons accumulating throughout that history that the city fell into the hands of barbarians. He also rehearsed the history of the divine economy, from Genesis through Revelation, to put Rome's moment in the larger framework of divine promises and Christian hopes. We still read his book today with great encouragement.

Where presentism is the driving force in our lives, filling the sails of our soul instead of the Wind of God's Spirit, uncertainty, despair, hopelessness, and fear are on the tiller. We become frantic, frenzied, even panicky. Our natural instinct is to think: “Survive!” We look for the most practical and pragmatic ways of alleviating fears, overcoming anxiety, and finding some peace and happiness. Presentism turns us from the image-bearers of God, who view life from the fixed vantage point of Christ, His promises, His Kingdom, and His return, into pinballs, shot into the game of life, and seeking to maximize each moment in isolation from all others, hoping to ring up enough points before we drop into the hole at the bottom of the game. Presentism forestalls the pursuit of holiness, robs us of our joy, and leaves us looking at our feet, like Peter, being swallowed by the Galilean Sea.

The antidote to presentism is to reclaim the Christian vantage point: Look up to Jesus; look back to God's promises and works; look for the coming of the Kingdom; and look forward to the return of Christ. And do this all at once, all the time, and you'll make the most of every opportunity for the glory of God and the blessing of the world.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose so many people have succumbed to the allure of presentism?
2. How can we as Christians keep from being sucked into the whirlpool of presentism?

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3. How would you advise a new believer to begin practicing the Christian vantage point on life?

Next steps – Preparation: Pray Psalm 90.12, 16, 17, asking God to show you how to make the most of your time today.

3 Solipsism

“Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side.” Luke 10.31, 32

How could they not care?

The two religious figures Jesus indicted in the parable of the good Samaritan were apparently too busy with their own concerns to help a wounded neighbor. Or else they considered that his problem wasn't their concern. Maybe they were just too much into themselves – their thoughts and their business – even to notice the need of someone else. For all they knew, really, that wounded guy might not even exist.

At least, they clearly reasoned, he didn't exist to them. Maybe they just didn't care.

The world has its share of wounded, damaged, oppressed, and dispossessed people. The poor, the refugees and immigrants, the neglected and the needy, the abused, abandoned, and aborted. Each of these groups – especially the last, infants in the womb – can be easily dismissed as of no particular concern to us. They're all someone else's problem, someone else's responsibility. Indeed, we would hardly even think of them were it not that they show up in the news from time to time.

Are we too busy with our own matters to care about the wounded people of our world? Too wrapped up in our own agendas and needs? Content with following Jesus in self-indulgent rather than self-denying ways? Prone to consider that all these needy people are no concern of ours?

Crossing over to the other side has become a way of life for many people. Even in their own communities, many people are focused only on their own interests, while the needs of others go largely unaddressed. And this indifference to others is a symptom of solipsism.

While few today would regard themselves as solipsists, or even be able to explain this idea, the ill wind of solipsism continues to find its way into the sails of many souls. It's operating in ours whenever we are so preoccupied with our own interests and needs that we just can't think about others. Solipsism may not demonstrate the brazen assertiveness or seek the spotlight of narcissism; and it may not manifest the freneticism or urgency of presentism; but it is just as focused on the self and its concerns as either of these. And, like the religious leaders in Jesus' parable, it hedges the soul against having to feel the pain of others, much less do anything about it.

Put another way, solipsism shreds the breezes of neighbor love from the Wind of God.

Solipsism defined

Solipsism is a philosophical idea which insists that nothing can be known outside one's own soul. All that we can know, and therefore all that we can or should pay attention to, is what happens in our own mind, heart, and conscience. Other people may or may not exist; they may or may not have souls. We just can't be certain, and therefore their concerns are properly no concern of ours.

The priest and the Levite who crossed over to the other side, refusing to help the man in Jesus' parable, were not solipsists – at least, not consciously. But they demonstrate what we can expect when solipsism and other ill winds of doctrine lead us to regard our own interests, convenience, or time as of the most importance, even in the face of obvious and urgent need.

Solipsism is in some sense a combination of narcissism and presentism which has metastasized into a kind of impersonal coldness of soul that says, “I can't think about this now.” Or, “I'm not going to get involved in

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this.” Or even, “Their problems are no concern of mine.” People affected by solipsistic thinking can appear aloof, indifferent, superior, self-righteous, or even psychotic.

To its credit, we can say that solipsism takes the soul seriously, and wants to make sure that the soul is properly cared for and protected. That’s more than what secular materialists can say, since they reduce the soul to nothing more than the chance interactions of chemicals, matter, and electricity.

But solipsism, while it exists nowhere in pure form, can still exert unhappy and distracting force on our heart, mind, and conscience.

Problems with solipsism

When the winds of solipsistic thinking are blowing in the sails of our soul, we become inured to the needs and sufferings of others. Jesus wept over the lost city of Jerusalem. When was the last time we wept before the Lord for a lost friend or neighbor? Jesus sensed the touch of a suffering woman in the midst of a crowd; we see all kinds of suffering on the evening news, and typically leave it there. Paul suffered mightily with the Thessalonians and others who suffered for Christ. We pray for the persecuted church one Sunday a year in the fall – if at all. God shapes each new baby in the womb, and creates the soul of each one. Have we become so accustomed to the murderous practice of abortion that we just can’t get exercised about it anymore?

The first Christians understood the tendency toward solipsism, and they determined to resist it. They practiced hospitality with one another; shared their possessions freely and eagerly; brought their suffering friends and neighbors to hear the Gospel and be healed of their diseases; and gave sacrificially to meet the needs of people in far-off places. None of them said that anything they possessed was their own. Whenever a need arose, they were quick to offer of the resources available to them. They gave freely of themselves, their time, and their resources, whether or not it was convenient to do so. In the generations beyond the apostles, Christians continued the practices learned from them. They cared for the sick, rescued abandoned children, housed the needy, fed the hungry, and sheltered widows and orphans. They understood themselves to be members of one another and sharers together in the one great soul of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What do our practices as Christians say about the winds of doctrine that guide us? What do our church budgets and programs reveal about the winds that guide our ecclesiastical vessels? Is the ill wind of solipsism anywhere present in our heart, mind, or conscience?

When the Wind of God is filling our souls, we will be like that good Samaritan, sensing and feeling the needs of others, going out of our way and far beyond the extra mile to help, and receiving the commendation of the Lord for our faithful works of neighbor love.

For reflection

1. Solipsism does not exist in a pure form, but what would you expect to see as evidence of its influence in your life?
2. What are some things we can do to become more sensitive to the needs of people around us?
3. How is it apparent in the ministry of Jesus that He was not influenced by this ill wind?

Next steps – Demonstration: Today, what opportunities will you have to reach out to someone in need? Commit your day to the Lord, and take steps to show others the neighbor love of the Lord.

4 Hedonism

“So he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’” Luke 12.18, 19

Sacrifice, work, suffering

How do we present the Gospel to the people God puts in our lives? Do we tell them, “God has a wonderful plan for your life”? Or, “You can know true happiness and lasting peace”? Or “You can go to heaven when you die”?

Much of our Gospel presentation – the call to believe in and receive Jesus – is designed to appeal to some variety of pleasure. Either personal peace, the promise of heaven, true happiness, or relief from guilt, tends to be the end toward which we invite people, when we tell them what Jesus has accomplished for us.

Now it is certainly true that coming to faith in Jesus Christ brings a kind of pleasure that cannot be known apart from Him (Ps. 16.11). Believers revel in that pleasure. We sing of the joy that comes from knowing the Lord, celebrate the peace and wellbeing we enjoy in Him, and share together in the thrill of His coming again to take us unto Himself forever. People need to understand that the Gospel is about true and lasting pleasure that comes from being forgiven, reborn, and indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

But if this is all we tell people about the Gospel, then we are misleading them. Jesus did not deny the joy that comes from knowing Him. But He also called His followers to lay down their lives, sacrifice self for others, work at doing good as often as possible, and be prepared to suffer opposition and persecution in this present age. The Gospel is not about mere self-indulgence, even if that self-indulgence is entirely spiritual in nature. We must die to self-interest that we may live to Jesus and follow Him, bearing our own cross and enduring all the hardship that entails.

So demanding was the Gospel that Jesus proclaimed, that those who were seeking only material benefits from Him turned away once they understood that He wasn’t about filling their stomachs on demand (Jn. 6. 60-66). If He wasn’t going to allow them to live at ease and be merry in their souls, then they weren’t going to waste their time following Him.

Even today, some who profess faith in Jesus Christ won’t sit still for you to tell them that they must *work* out their salvation, *die* to themselves, *take up* their cross, and *follow Jesus* in the way of sacrifice and suffering. Sadly, we have allowed the widespread hedonistic tendencies of our day to lodge in the sails of our soul.

Hedonism defined

Hedonism is an ancient philosophy that can be summarized, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, as “the pursuit of pleasure; sensual self-indulgence.” It is “the ethical theory that pleasure (in the sense of the satisfaction of desires) is the highest good and proper aim of human life.” For the hedonist, life is a perpetual Skinner bar, which we tap as needed to realize some sensual pleasure.

The hedonist does not want his life to be troubled by arduous or difficult things. He wants to take his ease at all times, to eat, drink, and be merry, and to indulge whatever sensual pleasures are available to him.

There’s a little hedonist in all of us, and the influencers of this world understand that well. Educators encourage us to prepare for well-paying jobs. Advertisers appeal to whatever will give us more fun, more excitement, or more esteem. Politicians seek our votes by pandering to mere self-interest and warning against their opponents, who only want to rob us of our fun.

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Pleasure is not a bad thing, so hedonism is at least on to something. But the pleasure for which we are made is holy pleasure, spiritual pleasure, pleasure unlike anything we can know in our flesh alone, and pleasure that comes from an intimate and transformative relationship with the living God. Hedonism appeals to the pleasure instinct in all of us, but hijacks it from its proper end to merely temporal and fleshly enjoyments.

Problems with hedonism

Hedonism obviously can create many problems. It exacerbates both narcissism and solipsism, and turns our moments in life to mere passing experiences of fun. Our tendency to indulge in sensual experience can lead us to pack our present with pleasures at the expense of a secure and responsible future. Think: credit card debt.

Hedonism can lead to addictions, whether of alcohol, drugs, food, sex, or pornography. Like lab rats who have figured out how to get that morsel of food by repeatedly tapping the little bar, people who indulge a misguided desire for pleasure find they are increasingly thinking only about when they can get the next fix.

The Church is not exempt from the problems of hedonistic thinking. When we emphasize having fun, feeling good, and being entertained rather than seeking the Lord and His Kingdom, giving ourselves to others in good works of love, and bearing bold witness in an increasingly hostile age, we are diverting the Wind of God – Who naturally wants to take us in such directions – to make room for the wind of self-indulgence, which always diverts us from our proper course. If everything in our Christian experience has to be easy, happy, pleasant, or convenient, then we're sailing to the ill wind of hedonism more than by the Word and Spirit of God.

True pleasure comes from knowing the Lord and delighting in Him, hating evil and devoting ourselves to good works. And true pleasure is more than sensual pleasure. It is the full and lasting sense of wellbeing, peace, and joy that comes when the sails of the soul are filled with the Wind of God. This is a pleasure that persists even in the midst of suffering, as we see in our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, as He hanged on the cross bearing the sins of the world, was able to know the joy that was set down before Him in the coming of His Kingdom and glory (Heb. 12.1-3; Ps. 22.21-31).

Guard your soul against hedonistic winds. Set the Lord Jesus always before you. Draw near to Him at all times, and follow in the ways of sacrifice, work, and suffering that He has promised. Thus, walking at His right hand, you will know fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16.8, 11).

For reflection

1. The pleasures we may know in this life are not necessarily sinful, but they can be. Explain.
2. What does it mean to seek the pleasure that comes from knowing the Lord?
3. How can you recognize when the ill wind of hedonism is blowing against the sails of your soul?

Next steps – Transformation: Ask the Lord to let you know more of the true, holy, spiritual pleasure of knowing Him.

5 Pragmatism

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10.31

Whatever you do

Life is about doing. There's no avoiding that. Everyone who has ever lived does certain things, often many of the same things over and over again.

All people eat and drink, for example. Most people have some work to do. We all have to get dressed, deal with other people, try to make ends meet, and enjoy some leisure activities. People *do* stuff, and most people do what they do for a reason. Their reason may or may not be clear, even to them. Or their reasons for doing the things they do may be merely selfish. But ask anyone why they do what they do, and they'll give you some reasons.

People whose lives are defined by narcissism, presentism, solipsism, and/or hedonism are driven by whatever works to satisfy their egos and self-interest. They don't bother wondering about what others might think or feel, or how others might respond to something they do. Their concern is solely with themselves in the present moment, and they will choose what they do to maximize each moment for their own selfish interests.

Christian life is also about doing. We have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and saved by grace through faith that we might *do good works* (Eph. 2.8-10). The works we do, whatever they may be, must not be defined solely by self-interest. We must not look only on our own things, but on the things of others (Phil. 2.4). Our purpose and calling is to do *good* works. We must be equipped for these by the Word and Spirit of God (2 Tim. 3.15-17; Gal 5.22, 23). We must train our hearts to be zealous for doing good works (Tit. 2.14). And we must be prepared in every situation to be ready for and to maintain good works, for this is how we seek and advance the Kingdom of God on earth (Tit. 3.1, 8, 14).

Whatever we do, we must do it within the parameters of goodness defined by God and His Word, and to bring glory to God so that others may glimpse Him through our actions. Christians will study, pray, prepare, anticipate, plan for, and do whatever they can to show the goodness of God to others by their works. In this respect, we must be diligent and pragmatic to do whatever it takes to glorify God in any situation.

But being pragmatic for the goodness and glory of God is not the same as pragmatism.

Pragmatism defined

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, pragmatism "is an approach that evaluates theories or beliefs in terms of the success of their practical application." The operative words here are "success" and "application." The Christian defines success as God being glorified when His goodness is displayed through our works. But pragmatism, as a philosophy of life, leaves the definition of "success" to the doer of works.

An excellent example of pragmatistic thinking comes in the song, "Soliloquy" from the musical *Carousel*. In this song, Billy Bigelow, a carnival operator, ponders the forthcoming birth of his child. At first, he's convinced that the child will be a son: "My boy, Bill; I will see that he's named after me!" He waxes eloquent about how he'll teach his son to be tough, like him, and not to let anyone "boss him or toss him around." His son will be able to do whatever he wants in life, just as long as it's what *he* wants, and not what someone forces on him.

But halfway through the song it occurs to Billy that this child might not be a boy at all. And if it's a girl, he hasn't a clue what he'll do with or for her. The mood of the song changes from boastful and brash to gentle, dream-like, and wistful. Toward the end of the song, Billy, convinced now that he's going to have a daughter,

resolves to do whatever it takes to make sure she has food on the table and the best clothes on her body: “I never knew how to get money,/but I’ll try! I’ll try! I’ll try!/ I’ll go out and make it,/or steal it, or take it – /or die!”

More important than teaching his daughter how best to live is that she be materially provided for. And whatever it takes for Billy to do that, he would do. Success is understood as material comfort; practical application turns out to be theft, which ultimately costs Billy his life.

Pragmatism does not define either what success might be, or which applications are proper. Happily, knowing people’s penchant for self-interest, societies promulgate laws which define the limits of what are socially acceptable practices. But those laws are too often mere human guidelines, and can be altered as the winds of doctrine change. Prior to 1973 in this country, the practice of abortion was not legal as a way to success in life. Now that has changed, and scores of millions of unborn infants have been sacrificed so that an abortionist can succeed in making money and his patient can succeed in not being inconvenienced by having to raise a child.

Whoever defines the meaning of success will call the terms of practical application, looking to pragmatism to justify every step in the process.

Problems with pragmatism

Christians should be pragmatic about doing good works. That is, we should carefully consider everything we do to make sure we’re doing it for the right reason – “success” defined as God being glorified – and according to the proper applications – “good” in terms of Scripture and our Lord Jesus Christ. As long as we are always focused on these ends and means, we will do whatever we do by the goodness and for the glory of God.

It’s when we begin to allow lesser ends to creep into our thinking, even unrecognized, that we end up making applications that are not necessarily good.

For example, we may believe that “success” is defined by having a big church where everyone is happy. Or maybe just a church where no one leaves to go to the big happy church across town. Now, what do we have to *do* to realize that definition of “success”? Perhaps we might change the focus of worship from God, exalted in glory, to us, languishing in our needs and wants, so that everything we do in worship is directed toward our feeling good about being there. We sing songs that make us feel good, and that are easy to learn and fun to sing. We listen to sermons that scratch some itch in our soul, without demanding too much of us either intellectually or practically. We do what we think people will *enjoy* doing, rather than what they perhaps *ought* to do to ascribe glory and majesty and honor to God and Jesus Christ, and to devote themselves unreservedly to following Him. We don’t want to have to *work* at worship; we want to *enjoy* worship. Thus making sure that worship is an enjoyable experience becomes the measure of a successful worship service. And a successful worship service is integral to having a successful church.

Pragmatic thinking blows into the sails of our soul in many ways, encouraging us to think above all about our own comfort or convenience, or our interests and needs, and leading us to do only those things which we feel comfortable doing – rather than, say, those things that require laying down our lives, taking up our cross, and going the extra mile to serve others.

The winds of pragmatism swirl continually around the hearts, minds, and consciences of believers and their churches. And unless we are convinced that God’s glory is the only proper end of everything we do, and God’s Word and Spirit are the true definers of good works, we can easily be blown off course in our journey with the Lord.

Fleshy Winds

For reflection

1. What does it mean to do whatever you do to the glory of God?
2. Why must Scripture and the Lord Jesus Christ be the standard for good works?
3. How can we tell if we're doing something for merely *pragmatic* reasons?

Next steps – Preparation: In prayer, look ahead to your day, and all that you'll be doing. Let Psalm 90.12, 16, 17 guide you as you commit this day to glorifying God.

6 Racism

Then the Jews answered and said to Him, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me." John 8.48, 49

A tenacious root

The 1949 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, loosely-based on a novel by James A. Michener, was widely acclaimed when it was made into a film in 1958. Here was everything a post-war generation could like in a film. A love story unfolding around World War II heroism, set in an exotic south seas location, packed with likeable characters, and carried along by some of the finest music and lyrics ever. It appealed to Americans from Princeton, NJ, to Little Rock, ARK (as the postal code was at that time). It made you laugh, cry, and hope all at the same time.

But it made some people very angry because of its stance on racial equality.

In the story, a young lieutenant falls in love with a Polynesian woman. He knows this will go nowhere because his family in New Jersey is racially prejudiced. He is friends with a young nurse, who is also falling in love with a local French widower. But he has two Polynesian children from his first marriage, and the young nurse, from Little Rock, has a hard time coming to grips with this – much to the Frenchman's disappointment and rage.

The lieutenant, Joe Cable, sings his anger and frustration in a song entitled, "[You've Got to Be Taught](#)." He warns that racism is not something that arises naturally from within us; instead, he insists, we must be taught, carefully taught, to hate people simply because of the color of their skin or the shape of their eyes.

But once racial prejudice becomes planted in the soul, it can be difficult to eradicate. In times of rage or fear or self-righteousness, it will burst to the surface, like the mob that accused Jesus of being a "Samaritan." Racism is among the ugliest, most dangerous, and most deadly ill winds; and it can easily find its way into the sails of our soul, if we are not careful to guard against it.

Racism defined

We hardly need a lesson on racism. Racism is not just an American problem. It has existed in every culture, among a wide variety of populations, and for political, cultural, social, and religious reasons for as long as anyone can remember. Racism is perhaps the most un-Godlike of ill winds, since it functions as the precise contradiction of how God describes Himself: "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For *the LORD does not see* as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart'" (1 Sam. 16.7).

Racism is a particularly heinous ill wind, because it infects the soul in so many ways, creating suspicion, fear, hatred, self-justification, oppression, violence, and many other dangerous tendencies. It also becomes a convenient tool for denouncing and attacking one's enemies. When the Jews of Jesus' day sought to brand Him as a Samaritan, they were using racial categories to try to undermine His credibility and incite the people against Him. But those who tried to play the "race card" against Jesus only demonstrated their own inward wickedness, just as those today who loudly denounce their opponents as racists indicate the presence of such ill winds in the sails of their own souls.

Racism can become systemic in societies and cultures, such that institutions, laws, and social protocols reflect discriminatory and oppressive practices enforced by the status quo. We recall that the apostle Paul was seized, beaten, and arrested because he was alleged to have brought a Gentile into the temple court, thus showing how prejudiced and corrupt the practice of Hebrew religion had become in that day (Acts 21.26-31).

Fleshy Winds

But racism is above all an ill wind in the soul. If people did not unfurl the sails of their soul into racist breezes, racism would quickly subside. But it is precisely because people prefer to look on the color of skin, the shape of eyes, and other ethnic markers to celebrate their own superiority at the expense of others that racism persists, and racist storms continue to wreak such havoc in cultures all over the world.

Problems with racism

For the Christian, racism impedes our calling to love God and our neighbors, and does so in four ways.

First, those who harbor racist sentiments show that they despise the image of God in their fellow human beings. God is so great and glorious, so vast and complex, so beautiful and awesome in His being and attributes, that it takes people of all races and both sexes to even begin to approximate the glories of His image. All people are made in the image of God, and are therefore deserving of respect and deference because of their potential in becoming more like Him. Racism blinds us to the image of God in our neighbors, and thus prevents us from loving Him and them.

Second, as previously noted, racism defeats the practice of looking on the heart of people, to appreciate their inherent worth and to affirm and encourage them from within. If we can't get past the outward appearance of people, we'll never be able to see into their eternal souls; and we won't be much inclined to spend or be spent for their souls, either (2 Cor. 12.15).

Third, it's clear that racism is a primary reason why there is such a shortage of neighbor love in our day. Racism causes us to look down on others with disdain, or at best, indifference. We're forever crossing over to the other side of the road when the needs of people not like us are obvious on every hand. We end up despising those whom God has placed before us, that His love might reach to and heal.

Finally, racism contributes to the tribalization of Christianity, hiding behind the mask of denominationalism to conceal ungodly bias between Christians of different races.

Past generations – including Christians – have promoted racist views and justifications for injustice and oppression, and not just in the practice of slavery. European imperialism, contempt for immigrants, the ghettoizing of whole populations, and the denial of rights and liberties to select racial groups have all, at one time or another, been justified and vigorously defended by specious arguments from Scripture and natural law. Sadly, the Church has often led in promoting racist views, so let us make it our business to drive the ill wind of racism from the sails of our soul, and pursue the peace of Jesus with all peoples.

For reflection

1. Why is racism the most un-Godlike of ill winds?
2. How can you tell when racism is finding its way into the sails of your soul?
3. What practical steps can you as a believer take to combat the ill wind of racism?

Next steps – Preparation: Pray that God will show you what you can do to keep racism from blowing you off course with the Lord.

7 Tribalism

But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, "What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name." Acts 4.15-17

Sinful self-interest

Many winds of doctrine are blowing around us these days, as we have seen. These do not appeal equally to us, and to some we pay but little heed. But the law of sin that lingers in the soul can open readily and unexpectedly to those ill winds that promise to vaunt the self; and there is a clear explanation for this.

God is continually revealing Himself to the soul of every human being. He does this through the things He has made. All of creation and much of the culture people make and use bear witness to the fact that God exists; they tell us something about His Deity – His transcendence, immensity, goodness, wisdom, power, and more (Rom. 1.18-20). Every human being knows God, at some level. But the natural tendency of people – due to the law of sin – is to deny the knowledge of God, and to exalt the self to the command seat of the soul. Rather than glorify God and give thanks for His greatness and love, people turn to their own ideas and thoughts about life, making themselves the final reference point for belief and life.

Thus, the self becomes god, the final arbiter of truth. "You will be like God" resonates in the soul of every person who turns from the true God to their own selfish interests. And whatever ill wind reinforces this notion is welcomed by the law of sin and channeled into the sails of the soul. People can become so full of self, that not even incontrovertible evidence will change their views.

Take the case of those religious leaders who arrested Peter and John for healing a lame man and preaching the Gospel. They were perplexed by the boldness of Peter and John. They remembered that these men had been with Jesus. They saw the evidence of the lame man right before their eyes, and they heard Peter testify that it was faith in the Name of Jesus alone that made this man well.

In conference, they agreed that "a notable miracle had been done through them" and that throughout the city of Jerusalem, people were talking excitedly about it. A great good work had been done, exciting many to wonder and hope. And how did the religious leaders respond? They tried to sweep the matter under the rug and stamp out any further spread.

Why? A great good had been done. People were abuzz with hope and anticipation. And all that cadre of religious leaders could think to do was to stamp it out?

Yes, of course. Because as good as that work was, it was not, in their minds, as great a good as preserving their status as leaders in Jerusalem. They had already fallen back on that commitment to put Jesus to death (Jn. 11.45-48), and in our text it is clear they were just as committed as ever to maintaining their place and power. Their self – individually and corporately – was threatened by Peter and John, and they would take whatever steps were necessary to reinforce their self and maintain their position, their authority, and their place in the public eye.

The sin of worshiping self blinded them to the truth. We see the same thing happening in our own day.

Tribalism revisited

This self-willed blindness to truth demonstrates tribalism that has passed from an outward influence to become a flaring infection in the soul. We previously described tribalism as that tendency to seek like-minded

others in whose camaraderie and common views we can find reinforcement for our own ideas and aspirations. Finding a tribe we feel safe in, is thus an outward quest for community, and can be a strictly temporary phenomenon. But committing to a tribe and its views, place, and project can so infect the mind, heart, and conscience that ideas of truth, goodness, and justice are corrupted, and we become blinded from within to the obvious realities around us.

This is what we read in Acts 4, and this was entirely consistent with what we saw throughout the public ministry of Jesus. The religious leaders of two opposing tribes, Sadducees and Pharisees, joined forces to protect their common interests. It didn't matter how much good Jesus did, or how true His teachings were, or how faithful He was to Scripture. He had to go. And if *He* had to go, to protect their tribal self-interests, *His followers* had to go as well.

The tribal loyalty that attracted these men *outwardly* had become a *fixed condition in their souls*. Only a miracle of God can overcome such deep-rooted self-interest.

Problems with tribalism

When tribalism becomes settled in the soul – that conviction which says, in the words of Job mocking his interlocutors, “We are the people, and when we die, wisdom dies with us” (Job. 12.1, 2) – then people become *blind* to the truth and seek only to vaunt themselves, their views, and their project. Self and that which supports the self – one's tribe – become the defining values for those whose soul is filled with the winds of “me and everyone who agrees with me.”

Tribalism at this level makes us so self-interested – individually and communally – that we become determined to cancel those who disagree, deny their rights, and suppress their freedoms. If we don't, if we fail to take drastic measures, even in the face of contrary facts, then our self and our tribe may be unmasked as shallow and merely self-interested, leaving us embarrassed and vulnerable.

Tribalism as a worldly wind can often be just a tempting breeze that we might entertain for a while but never wholly embrace. Tribalism as an ill wind settled in the soul can be blinding; it can unleash irrational fears and inchoate reasoning, and lead to hurtful and dangerous actions; it can cause us to fabricate realities that exist nowhere other than in our mind and our tribe, and can, in the end, be a denigrating and destructive force.

In our day, the ill winds of tribalism have interdicted the souls of many in high places. They are immune to truth; intemperate in condemning their opponents; irrational and at times hysterical in vaunting their views; and determined – like the religious leaders who confronted Peter and John – to silence anyone who disagrees with them.

Be on guard against such tendencies finding a home in your own soul.

For reflection or discussion

1. Tribalism can affect us at two levels. Explain.
2. How does deep-seated tribalism cause us to look upon those with whom we disagree?
3. How can you tell when you are beginning to be influenced by tribalist notions?

Next steps – Preparation: In prayer, consider: Is there anyone in your Personal Mission Field whom you are failing to love as your neighbor? What should you do?

Fleshy Winds

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why do we say that these ill winds are “fleshy”?
2. Why can it be so hard to recognize when we’re being affected by these winds of doctrine?
3. How can keeping focused on Jesus, exalted in glory, guard us against these fleshy ill winds?
4. How can believers help one another to keep these fleshy ill winds out of the sails of their soul?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this third part of our study, *Winds of Doctrine*?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.