

SELFISH OR SMART?

“For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s” [Phil. 2:21]

According to an African proverb, a man who climbs to the rooftop on a ladder should not be in a hurry to remove it because he may soon need it on his way down. How often have we felt that we have been used? We see somebody who is struggling up. He or she looks sincere, nice, humble and respectful. We put in everything to mentor or raise them. As soon as they can fend for themselves, we no longer matter to them. They may even begin to undo anything that links us to their success.

Students do it to their teachers and children, to their parents. How about husbands to wives and vice versa? Some wives stay home full-time to raise the children while their husbands build up their careers. As soon as the men succeed, their wives are no longer fashionable enough! Adultery and threat of divorce, if not domestic violence, begin to feature in family matters. It may also be the other way round. As soon as she becomes a star in her field, her husband is no longer good enough to be her escort!

In an organisational setting, we may mentor rising stars. As soon as they start shining brightly, the first eyes that they will love to dazzle to blindness will be ours! It also happens in the ministry. As soon as Paul was imprisoned in Rome, awaiting execution, all his companions, except Luke, deserted him [2 Tim. 4:10-11, 16]

How about us in relation to God? When we are in need, we are on our knees to Him, praying and fasting. On our way into physical, economic or spiritual exile, that is when we remember God. We sing and wail like the children of Israel in exile in Babylon, “by the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion” [Ps. 137:1]. But, as soon as we are delivered, we forget Him, boasting, “my power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth” [Deut. 8:17]. Therefore, we are hardly different “for all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s” [Phil. 2:21].

Are we just plain selfish or playing smart? That is the subject of today’s lesson. We shall use the relationship between Abraham and his nephew, Lot, as a case study.

1. Selfish or smart?

To be selfish is to be concerned mainly with one's profit, benefit or pleasure, all deriving from self-interest. The average person seeks to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. We tend to love self [2 Tim. 3:2] and seek self [Phil. 2:21] before others. This is well illustrated by Solomon when he said, "whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy" [Eccl. 2:10]. The Rich Fool would rather expand his barn than give away the excess to the needy [Lk 12:16-21], just as the rich man would rather let his dogs lick Lazarus' sores than let him eat the crumbs from his own table [Lk 16:19-25]. The sons of Zebedee would want to monopolise the seats around Jesus in His coming Kingdom to the detriment of the other Apostles [Mk 10:35-37].

To be smart is to be clever, ingenious. We are familiar with the expression, "smart Alec(k)," used to describe a person who knows how to manipulate himself/herself out of tough situations. When David was running away from Saul who sought to kill him, he fled to the home of Samuel the prophet, because he was sure that Saul would not dare to touch him in the full glare of the prophets surrounding Samuel [1 Sam. 19:18-24]. On another occasion when David found himself a prisoner of Achish, the king of Gath, he suddenly "changed his behaviour before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard." The king was angry with his servants for bringing a mad man into his presence, saying, "have I need of mad men, ... shall this fellow come into my house?" [1 Sam. 21: 10-15]. The king set David free!

In some cases, however, smart people use their smartness in a devious (insincere) way. In the Parable of the Unjust Steward, Jesus tells the story of a steward whom his master had asked to resign. He went to his master's clients to cleverly doctor the books to reduce their debt burden, with the hope that they would reciprocate his "kindness" after leaving that job. When the matter came to his lord's attention, he commended him rather sarcastically "because he had done wisely" [Lk 16: 1-8]. *Therefore, anybody whose smartness is not God-centred or other-centred is selfish.* Let us now study the story of Abraham and Lot to gain more insights into the subject.

2. Abraham and Lot

Background

Abraham (born Abram) was the son of Terah, a Syrian. His brothers were Nahor and Haran, the father of Lot [Gen. 11: 26]. However, Haran died before his father, Terah [v. 28]. As a result, the responsibility of raising Lot fell on his grandfather, Terah. Some years later, Terah left Ur of the Chaldees, his hometown, and took with him Abram (and his then barren wife, Sarai) and grandson, Lot, to sojourn in Canaan, in a place called Haran, presumably named after Lot's late father. It was there that Terah died at the age of 205 years [vv. 31-32]. After his death, Lot came under the direct responsibility of Abram, his uncle.

At 75 years of age, God called out Abram on his covenant journey “unto a land that I will shew thee” [Gen. 12:1]. He left Haran, taking along with him Sarai, his wife, her maids and his servants, Lot, “and all the substance that they had gathered” [v. 5]. Let us see what followed thereafter.

a) Abram helped Lot to economic independence

With the death of his father and grandfather, Lot’s future became more uncertain. Since Abram was the only one called by God, he did not need to take Lot along on his covenant journey. Abram could easily have sent him back to Nahur, his brother and Lot’s other surviving uncle still living in Ur. But, *of his free will, Abram chose to take care of Lot.* Abram had been blessed because he was rich in cattle, silver and gold [Gen. 13:2]. He also set up Lot to be economically independent “and Lot also which went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents” [v. 5].

b) Lot’s unhealthy rivalry with Abram

It did not take long for Lot’s true colours to manifest themselves for “the land was not able to bear them [Abram and Lot] that they might dwell together” [v. 6]. To the chagrin of the Perizzites and the Canaanites among whom they had settled, there was a big strife between the herdsmen of Lot and those of his much older uncle, Abram [v.7].

Abram did not want trouble. So, he called the young man to a meeting and told him, “let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen for we be brethren” [v. 8]. Abram offered him complete independence. He divided the land into two parts and gave the younger man the privilege to choose first [v.9].

c) Lot’s short-sighted perception of success

The “smart” fellow that he was, Lot quickly surveyed the two pieces of real estate. He “lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every place” [v. 10]. He did not hesitate to choose that side which had the cities of the plain. But, you know what? The part he had chosen had Sodom and Gomorrah, and “the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly” [vv. 11-13]. All that glitters is not gold!

d) Consequences

Lot thought that he did not need Abram any more for “they separated themselves the one from the other” [11]. He did not care that what he had left for the old man who had raised him was uncultivated territory which would need a great deal of work to develop. What he failed to realise was that those who know their God shall be strong and they shall do exploits [Dan. 11:32]. God promised to give

freehold rights to Abram “and to thy seed for ever” [Gen. 13: 15]. But, what happened to smart Lot?

- i. He could never have control over the land that he had chosen. The original owners held sway and made wars on others and Lot [Gen. 14: 1-11].
- ii. Lot was captured and he lost all his holdings [v. 12]. It was one of his escaped servants who brought the bad news to Abram [v. 13]. It took his uncle that he had cut off to rescue him and his family and to restore his wealth [vv. 14-16].
- iii. Lot’s short-term gains turned into long-term pains. He lost his sons-in-law to lust in Sodom and Gomorrah [Gen. 19:14]. His wife died of disobedience, when she was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back on burning Sodom and Gomorrah [v. 26]. His selfish daughters got him drunk and raised children by him. The Moabites and Ammonites are the descendants of those incestuous relationships [vv 36-38], and these were the groups who later made war on Jehosaphat, a descendant of Abraham [2 Chron. 20:1-2].

3. Lessons

From that story, we can learn a good number of lessons, and here are some of them:

a) Shortsightedness

Some of us tend to believe that the racetracks of life run in only one direction, that is, forward. Therefore, when they perceive that they have overtaken others, they would assume that they would never fall behind them again. So, they might not need those behind them again. That reminds me of a joke by the late George Burns, a great American comedian who died in his late 90’s. He said that when he was young, he was taught to respect his elders. Now that he was the oldest person around, he was glad that he had nobody to respect anymore!

During his wandering years, David helped Nabal, Abigail’s husband, to protect his flock against thieves and invaders. Now, Nabal had become rich. When David heard that he was shearing [cutting wool from] his sheep (the man had three thousand sheep and one thousand goats), David asked Nabal for food and meat for himself and his entourage. David was quite polite in his request when he sent his servants, “say to him that liveth in prosperity, peace be to thee, and peace to thine house, and peace unto all that thou hast.” Then, after reminding Nabal of his contribution to his success, he made the following request, “give, I pray thee, whatsoever cometh to thine hand unto thy servants, and to thy son, David” [1 Sam. 25:2-8]. Nabal’s reply was terrible! “Who is David and who is the son of Jesse? There be many servants now a days that break away every man from his own master” [v. 10]. Yet,

David was the man who killed Goliath, the man who would be the next king. By the time the wine of self-deceit left Nabal, it was too late for him to retract. “It came to pass in the morning when the wine was gone out of Nabal, and his wife told him these things [i.e., what he had said and how she had gone to appease David], that his heart died within him, and he became as a stone. And it came to pass about ten days after, that the Lord smote Nabal, that he died” [vv. 37-38].

b) Shamelessness

Selfish people think that while they are smart, other people are foolish. When they are doing well, they forget those who have contributed to their success. However, the moment they are in trouble again or need help, they will swallow their pride and go to whoever can render them help, including even their worst enemy. Their guiding principle is “permanent interests, not permanent friends!”

Lot and his servants had no qualms to run back to Abram, in spite of what they had done to the old man. The Prodigal Son ran back to his father, the man he had forced to execute his will before his death [Lk 15:17-18]. That is why we are enjoined not to “remove thy neighbour’s landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance” [Deut. 19:14; see also Prov. 23:10].

c) Loss of spirituality

Those who are “lovers of their own selves” exhibit selfishness [2 Tim. 3:2] and are carnally minded [Rom. 8:5-6]. They that live “in the flesh cannot please God” [Rom. 8:8]. Abram raised Lot and “he that delicately bringeth up his servant from a child shall have him become his son at length” [Prov. 29:21]. Therefore, he might have taught Lot about the one, true God. There are traces of that in his relationship with the two angels who had come to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah [Gen. 19:1-16]. However, there is clear evidence that he lost his spirituality to greed and selfishness. In the end, he lost a paternalistic uncle and a materialistic wife. He resorted to heavy drinking which made it possible for his daughters to seduce him.

d) Poverty and disgrace

The word of God says, “there is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty” [Prov. 11:24]. It is in giving that we receive [Lk 6:38]. Lot was captured and dispossessed of his wealth, just because he did not want to work with the uncle that brought him up. His love of the better things led him to choose the materialistic and corrupt inheritance that ultimately destroyed his spiritual life. When a top footballer is left alone on the pitch, his dribbling runs look like madness!

4. Conclusion: How to overcome selfishness

We are all guilty of selfishness because those who can pretend that they are not doing it to others are doing it to God every second! Therefore, it is an undesirable habit that we all need to give up. Here are some ways that we can use:

a) *Put Christ first*

The best way to overcome selfishness is to first give our lives to God through Christ, for “to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour” [Phil. 1:21-22]. Thereafter, Christ lives in us “and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” [Gal. 2:20].

b) *Seek the good of others*

We are instructed to “let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth” [1 Cor. 10:24]. That is why Jesus has warned us, “if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man’s, who shall give you that which is your own?” [Lk 16:12]. Abram beat Lot at every stage because Abram was always more interested in his nephew’s good than his own.

c) *Manifest love*

Love “doth not behave unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil” [1 Cor. 13:5]. If you can love your neighbour as yourself, then, you can only but be selfless.

Don’t ever give up on those that you have mentored no matter their present relationship with you because your reward is from God, not from them. Abram never gave up on Lot. When God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, it was Abram who stood in the gap for Lot and his family [Gen. 18:22-33]. God does not give up on us even when we deny Him for “if we believe not, yet He abideth faithful: He cannot deny Himself” [2 Tim. 2:12-13]. Always remember that “Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow His steps” [1 Pet. 2:21].