

Human Impulses

The Scottish Philosopher, Adam Ferguson once said, “Every step and every movement of the multitude are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.” When Ferguson first suggested this concept in the middle of the 18th century, his idea was rather novel. However, within a very short period of time, his novel thought helped to shape a new generation of social and economic policy not only for Europe, but for America, as well. To put it very simply, his notion of spontaneous order suggests that most of the great revolutionary moments of history were not designed in advance from any theoretical blueprint. They were instead the outcome of things just falling into place, which could have never been predicted otherwise; unforeseen events producing unforeseen outcomes. Underlying this theory is the idea that as humans we act randomly and rarely with forethought. I suppose this is true as far as it goes. For not everything we do or say is premediated. We don’t necessarily have an ideology that stands behind every decision we make. More often than not we just act and then work out the details as we go along. Even still, I would argue there are certain identifiable impulses which compel us forward. Impulses that subconsciously motivate us even if we are not consciously aware of them. We could think of our desire for knowledge or power or happiness or pleasure or security as examples; these might not specifically be in the front of our minds as we choose to act or not act, but they lurk somewhere in the background. If we journey still further back into the recesses of our mind, I do believe we finally reach a universal impulse, a universal motive to which all human action can be traced back to. And that primary driving force for every human being is a desire for recognition. We all want to be recognized, understood, appreciated, and valued. From the jobs we perform to the activities we engage in; from the social events we attend to the charities we support, it is all a cry for recognition. Social media has become just one more platform for us to work out our most basic need to be heard and seen. Identity more than ideology, position

more than power, social recognition more than monetary gain drives human ambition. We want to be recognized as individuals who make a difference in this world. It is an ongoing attempt to make sense of why we were born in the first place. We want our lives to have meaning and purpose beyond ourselves. And this impulse, more than greed or lust or envy, drives our behavior. How else can you account for our willingness to sacrifice everything for a cause, a belief, an idea, a principle? No other species on earth will willingly neglect the survival instinct to pursue a higher cause or virtue. Don't get me wrong, this is by no means a bad impulse. The need to be recognized and valued as an individual is godly provided it is properly directed. Separated from God, though, this impulse for recognition can be very dangerous.

And this leads me to our text this morning. James and John wanted something for their devotion, loyalty and sacrifice. After all, they had abandoned everything to follow Christ. And they did this with little regard for their own wellbeing or even that of their family's wellbeing. They had gladly given all, but now the time had come for them to get something in return. But the something they wanted was not money or fame or worldly prestige. They wanted something more basic; they wanted to sit beside Christ, one on each side. And this request was none other than a request for recognition. Such a prominent seat of glory would confirm their value and importance to Christ; a heavenly nod for their sacrifice. It would prove that their lives were meaningful and important. A divine acknowledgement of the pledge they had made to something greater than themselves. But this need for recognition was misguided. And Christ called them on this errant impulse. They wanted recognition, but they were looking for it in the wrong place. James and John thought recognition could only come through some position of glory, some position of honor. Christ instructed them otherwise. He redirected them to see that true recognition came not in having others look at you, but rather in you looking outward stooping low to attend to the needs of others. He flipped the human impulse for recognition on its head. Where they were looking for recognition was all wrong. They were starting with themselves, with their own impulse, and then trying to satisfy it

inwardly. Christ redirected the inner gaze by starting with the neighbor. He told them the only way to greatness is through outward service. For the glory of Christ was not found in what He received, but in what He gave, as He gave His life as a ransom for all.

The basic impulse for recognition will always be with us. It's part of who we are. But it is only in serving others that we find what we so long for and seek after. Only by giving do we receive. How bizarre this is! We find our identity by helping others find theirs. We find our dignity by fighting for the dignity of others. We understand ourselves only by understanding others. Christ teaches us this better way. In so doing, He forever changed how we should think about human identity. Identity to the world is equated with status and rights and privileges, but to God, human identity is equated with service and sacrifice and transcendent value in Him. This is the only way personal identity makes sense: we find our self-awareness as we struggle for life against the cruel and harsh and sinful elements of this world. This clash leaves us looking beyond ourselves and ultimately looking to God. In Him we discover the joy of existing, the joy of living. Christ offers to every human being, regardless of worldly station or class, race or ethnicity, the dignity of being recognized by God. So even if the world seems to have forgotten you, rest assured you are forever remembered by God. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H Mills