

Cost/Benefit Analysis

Lesson: John 15:15-21, 1 Peter 3:13-17

“What’s in it for me?” How popular is this phrase in our culture’s modern life? Well, I did an unscientific survey by a Google search on those words, and received a listing of “about 1,580,000,000 results.” To counterbalance these findings, I searched the phrase “serve your country” - the return? “about 75,500,000 results.” That is a difference of about 20 to 1.

On the weekend that we honor the memory of people who have died in service wearing a military uniform, I looked at the websites for several of the armed forces and saw the marketing focus of all the benefits and incentives for joining. Listen closely: I’m not criticizing the military here. You do what you have to do in today’s military. And the truth is that nothing has changed that much since the Continental Army of the revolution. Only 17,000 men volunteered for the revolutionary army out of an adult male population of over half a million in 1775, about 1 in 30. Commander-in-Chief Washington petitioned Congress for longer enlistment times and increased pay as incentives. Congress gave and then took back 3 years later, cutting the Army budget. Sound familiar? One writer sums up the cost/benefit analysis of revolutionary military service pretty well: “low pay, often rotten food, hard work, cold, heat, poor clothing and shelter, harsh discipline, and a high chance of becoming a casualty.” Sound familiar? Think Afghanistan and Iraq, ...not mentioned much in the marketing on the websites.

In mid 19th century French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville described the genius of the American experiment as not “selfishness” but “enlightened self-interest.” The unique individualism of American society was the understanding that what a person does to improve the life of others also improves life for that person. But the definition has gotten more ambiguous over the years. Now, more commentary says that what one person does in his own interest is good for everyone. Sinatra’s 1967 song “I did it my way” was the #1 funeral song in America in 2008 and Great Britain in 2010. (and we should be honest that our generation and older are the ones picking that song.) Maximizing self-interest improves the whole society. Being selfish is in everyone’s interest? Tell our young people all the benefits for serving their country, and put the possible costs in death or PTSD or a VA that Congress has long underfunded in the fine print. You know the politicians’ phrases of self-interest: “a rising tide lifts all boats,” or maximizing profit always “trickles down.” My father, who never had the chance to go to college, was smart enough to ask, “Do they expect someone to live on a trickle?”

Jesus was never very smart about marketing. Look at all the chances he had to leverage his popularity and gain followers, all the opportunities he had to make friends in high places that would give him more access to increased market share, all the miracles and give aways he could have produced to get customers (oops, I mean followers) in the door to hear his spin. Oh, I forgot. He was offered all these deals by the Tempter in the wilderness in the very beginning of his ministry, and Jesus turned him down flat.

Jesus takes a different approach, a very straight-forward and honest appeal. He takes his cue from the Great Law, and says: Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor. Love me with your life, and love others the way I love you. He is also pretty clear about what loving him means: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me." The incentive? the reward? the profit in the deal? "My Father will love those who love me."

It is the strangest cost/benefit arrangement we can imagine: love me, live my love to others, stay true with the motives and decisions of your days, and you will have all the strength and courage of my love. Turn away from my love and, ...well, you are on your own to pursue your own ideas and decisions to do it your way. You have a choice: trusting someone who gives his life for you to show his love ...or doing what you can to make it your way when your only idea of good is maximizing your benefit and reducing your cost.

Jesus tells the followers that they can't get to "good" without giving up themselves to something bigger than they are. The Bible is not some theoretical, philosophical treatise on the meaning of life, and it is not one of the 184,000+ titles you find on Amazon when you search "self-interest." The Bible is pretty straight-forward when it comes to the meaning of life: love God, serve others, sacrifice when it comes to that, and trust that you have done some good for Christ while you are here. It doesn't work to be in it for your reward, the easy life here or the absurdity of that ticket to heaven like it will be unending entertainment just for you. Jesus was never in it for him. So if you are in it for you, you have nothing in common with Jesus. Why would you want to be with someone forever that you never really wanted to be like now? You are not being smart or prudent; you are just selfish. Search Amazon for "compassion" and you will find 5600 titles. Compassion loses out to self-interest about 30 to 1, (which sounds to me like 30 pieces of silver). If you really are looking for a complete definition of compassion, let me suggest reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Peter was the one who is the picture of self-interest, and not so enlightened. He does the smart thing at the fire when he is recognized. He deflects and tells a little, self-serving lie. What would we do, caught in his shoes? He disobeys one of the Big Ten, and offers up a false witness to the man who has just been arrested because he would not compromise when they came for him. He would not forsake them when death came calling.

But Peter is one of our saints, because he tells us that it is never too late to turn our life around! The one who denied his Lord gives us advice: "Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you, but do it with gentleness and respect. Keep your conscience clear. ...for it is better to suffer for doing good, if this should be God's will, than for doing evil."

Peter realized the stupidity of selfishness, of trying to decide what is good for us by calculating the cost and benefit of our self-interest. Math does not tell us right and wrong. We have to give ourselves to someone who knows what is good for us, and trust he knows better than we do. Like the old hymn says, we are called to "trust and obey, for there's no other way," and let life's path go where he takes us.

Peter's question after that morning conversation with Jesus by the sea becomes, "What's in it for God?" Listen to the change Peter makes. "Do not be afraid of anyone, and do not worry. But have reverence for Christ in your hearts, and honor him as Lord." Instead of making choices on what's in it for him, instead of calculating how his circumstances will be better or worse, instead of doing the math of self-interest, Peter makes a choice out of love for someone more important than he is and accepts whatever happens as a result that is worth the cost. There is the different cost/benefit analysis: we measure how much we are loved and we love in return. Whatever happens, it is worth our loving, so long as love is honored and love is served.

Peter saw how much Jesus loved God and loved him, and his response was not just to say thanks for the memories. Peter was willing to pay whatever cost to honor the gift he had received. Deciding what we should do for love's sake is never easy, because we are trying to maximize the benefit for someone we love and minimize the cost to them. We are willing to pay whatever cost. "For it is better to suffer for doing good, if this could be God's will, than for doing evil."

We do evil when we try to maximize the benefit to ourselves (the definition of selfishness), because we are denying the fact that someone else has to pay the cost we are trying to avoid. Every generation in a culture of self-interest and selfishness will want to maximize its own interests and deflect the cost to someone else, just like we older folk want to defer the cost of our entitlements to future generations. We don't honor people who gave their lives for us just by remembering them while we take a holiday. They did not give their lives for "us"! How self-centered can we be to thoughtlessly say such a thing?

They gave themselves for duty and loyalty and to something bigger than they knew. They lost their lives for the greater ideal, vision, hope. They hoped that others would be willing to give the higher cost for the same greater cause. One hundred and fifty years ago de Tocqueville saw the genius in a culture who decided that free-as-they-were, it was in their own interest to look out for everyone's interest. We honor those who have given their lives, in uniform or not, by giving ourselves to what Lincoln – standing on the bloodiest battlefield of what we still like to call the Civil War – called "a more perfect union."

If we want to know how to turn selfishness in a culture into compassion, we must stop listening to the manipulations of greed in the guise of patriotism, or the people who applaud selfishness as a nation's ethic. We have to take the unusual step of actually reading about the living definition of "the good life" that we say we follow in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In the seasons of our better witness, we Christians have always served a nation by calling it to the love and justice we see in our Commander-in-Chief. We are called to measure our culture's goodness by what Christ would want us to be honoring. We Presbyterians confess that the chief end of humanity is not "enlightened self-interest," but an obedience that glorifies God alone and finds our joy in serving Christ by denying ourselves. We confess that thinking about "what's in it for me" is a revelation of our depraved, sinful self-centeredness. "I did it my way" is not a quote from holy scripture.

With either way – self-centeredness or service to Christ – there is cost and benefit, risk and reward. Choose God or self? You are going to serve somebody. We all have to decide whether we are in it for what's in it for us, or we are in it for what's in it for God? Peter chose first one and then the better, so we probably should take to his advice: "God will bless you if you endure the pain of undeserved suffering because you are conscious of his will. ...It was to this you were called, for Christ himself suffered for you and left you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

Two thousand years ago, Jesus showed the world that a denial of self-interest and a passion for God's love will get you further than all the sinful self-centeredness this world and our culture offers. History tells us that civilizations bent on their own self-interest rise and fall, but God's kingdom of love will never fail. Those churches who choose survival over ministry and market appeal over sacrifice in faithfulness are no different than a culture that has no saving qualities. The body of Christ that fosters the continued life of their resurrected Lord is the lasting and loving witness that Christ came to redeem the mess we have made, and he loves us enough to save us from our selfish selves.